

THE BLACK MOLE

George E. Rochester

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[Frontispiece

“I WON’T!” SHOUTED KENYON PASSIONATELY.

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THE BLACK MOLE

BY
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THE BLACK MOLE

CHAPTER I

THE TRAITOR!

THE military court which was being held in the Tower of London was hushed and still as the grey-haired judge addressed the prisoner.

“Robert Kenyon,” he said in grave tones, “whilst engaged in your duties in the technical department of the Tank Corps you designed a machine known as an earth crawler—a tank which can bore its way through solid earth and rock. You have been found guilty by this court of selling the plans of the earth crawler to a desperate gang of criminals!”

He paused a moment, then went on:

“These criminals, led by a man named Zworge, have built an earth crawler from the plans you sold them, and have used it for robbery and murder. Banks in Newcastle, Liverpool, and Manchester have been raided by these villains, night watchmen shot dead and more than half a million pounds stolen!”

Again he paused, and the stillness in the court was deathly.

“Robert Kenyon,” he resumed, and now his voice rang harshly, “in addition to selling the plans you have been found guilty of being a confederate of Zworge and his gang, and it is the sentence of this court that you go to prison for twenty years’ penal servitude!”

Every eye was turned on the young prisoner. He was standing with hands clenched, his clean-cut features pale beneath their tan.

“What did you say?” he rasped, glaring at the judge with burning eyes.

There was a flutter of excitement in court. Not often was a learned judge addressed in that manner by a prisoner in the dock.

“I said,” repeated the judge sternly, “that you will go to penal servitude for twenty years!”

“I won’t!” shouted Kenyon passionately. “You’re a fool—the whole lot of you are blundering fools. I’m as innocent as any of you. I’ll never serve that sentence. D’you hear me? *I’ll never serve it*——”

He broke off, struggling violently with the gaolers who had seized him and who were trying to hustle him from the dock. He caught one a blow on the mouth which sent the unfortunate official reeling, and landed another a savage jolt on the jaw.

The court was in an uproar, lawyers, barristers, and public shouting and yelling, whilst newspaper men feverishly scribbled details of this dramatic and unlooked-for scene.

The judge himself had half-risen to his feet. He was gripping the table in front of him and glaring at the scene in fury. Never in all his long years as a judge had he witnessed such disgraceful behaviour in any court over which he had presided.

Suddenly above the uproar a voice screamed:

“Look—the floor!”

An amazing thing was happening in the well of the court. The floor was vibrating madly, and above the tumult sounded a dull, metallic whir.

Next instant the floor heaved convulsively, there came a splintering crash and an immense black cone of whirling steel bored up into view.

Men yelled, women screamed, and there was a frenzied stampede for the doors. The whole floor was bulging upwards now, and above the shrieks of terror and the crash of falling benches sounded the high-pitched drone of powerful motors.

The dock went over with a resounding crash, flinging Kenyon and his gaolers sprawling, and pinning several people beneath it.

Scrambling to his feet, Kenyon stood staring with dilated eyes at the huge, sleek cylindrical monster of steel which had heaved itself up from out of the very bowels of the earth, and which was now resting on the floor of the court.

It was the earth crawler—the Black Mole, as Kenyon had dubbed her when he had designed her.

The circular steel ports between the great curved blades of her hull had been pulled open, and from them poured dense clouds of yellow gas which filled the court-room with a hideous murk.

Kenyon caught a whiff of the gas and staggered back, sick and dazed. A yellow wraith swirled round him, enfolding him in its foul and deadly fumes. His knees caved in, and with a choking cry he crumpled to the floor, a huddled, prostrate form.

Everywhere men and women, bewigged barristers and uniformed officials, were lying in sprawling heaps. The deadly yellow fog drifted over them, eddying out into the corridor to meet and drop those who came dashing to the scene. Denser and denser it grew, swirling along corridors, through doorways, up stairways, filling the old, historic Tower with its foul and deadly murk.

Suddenly a steel door in the hull of the Mole was pulled back and three men wearing black rubber suits and gas masks emerged. Stepping over the limp and sprawling bodies they groped their way through the yellow murk in the direction of the overturned dock.

Reaching it, they set to work examining every huddled body lying there until they found Kenyon. It was evidently him for whom they were searching, for picking him up, they carried him into the Mole.

A moment later another man emerged. He was clad in a tightly fitting black rubber suit and gas mask. Crossing agilely to where the judge was lying, he stooped and pinned a scrap of paper to the judge’s breast. On it was written:

“The Law is powerless against me and any man of mine. Robert Kenyon is my good friend and servant. That is why I am taking him away from you. Let this be a warning lest worse befall you.

“ZWORGE.”

Straightening up, the man retraced his steps to the Mole and disappeared into the hull. Then the door slid shut, the steel gas ports were closed and heavy caterpillar treads slid

out on each side of the hull.

They rumbled into life, and pivoting in her own length amidst the crash and dust of falling masonry, the Mole slid back into the cavity from which it had emerged.

The caterpillar treads were withdrawn into the hull, the bladed outer casing locked back into place and commenced to revolve. Faster and faster it whirled, and within a few moments the Mole was burrowing its way down into the bowels of the earth, leaving behind it a silent, shattered court-room and huddled bodies shrouded in deadly yellow murk.

• • • • •

How long Kenyon was aboard the earth crawler he never knew. In fact, he had no recollection of ever being aboard her at all.

All he did know was that when consciousness slowly returned he found that he was sitting lashed hand and foot to a chair in a sparsely furnished kitchen illuminated by a large oil lamp standing on a littered table.

His head was aching agonisedly, and as he began to take stock of his surroundings he saw that eight men were in the kitchen with him.

Four of them, swarthy-faced and unshaven fellows, were clad in worn and oil-stained dungarees. The others were in civilian attire, and it was one of these who drew Kenyon's burning glare.

The man was leaning against the table smoking a cigarette. His well-cut, dark lounge suit showed the slim lighthness of his frame, and, like the majority of the other men, his features were dark and swarthy. Kenyon picked him out at once as the leader and noted the man's thin, cruel-lipped mouth and his cunning green eyes.

"So, my friend," he said mockingly, "you have come round!"

Recollection was surging swiftly back on Kenyon now. He remembered that amazing scene in the court-room and the discharge of poison gas from the Mole.

"You're Zworge!" he grated.

"Yes," returned the other with a smile. "I am Zworge!"

Frantically Kenyon fell to struggling in his bonds, his one frenzied desire being to get at this villain and choke the life out of him.

"Struggling will avail you nothing," said Zworge amusedly. "Your bonds have been well tied."

Kenyon subsided, weak and panting.

"By heavens, Zworge," he grated, "one day I'll get even with you for this!"

Zworge spread out his hands with a gesture.

"For what?" he demanded. "Have I not saved you from a long term of imprisonment?"

"If it hadn't been for you, you hound," rasped Kenyon, "I wouldn't have been sentenced to that term of imprisonment. You ruined me, faked the evidence against me, and one day I'll make you pay!"

"You talk as though I intend to let you live," purred Zworge.

Kenyon glowered at him.

“What is this place and why have you brought me here?” he demanded.

“This place is one of my many secret headquarters,” replied Zworge. “Just where it is situated does not matter. As to why I have brought you here, I wish to have a little chat with you!”

“Go ahead!” said Kenyon grimly.

“When I learned that the plans of this marvellous earth crawler of yours were nearing completion,” said Zworge, “I made you an offer, over the telephone, of twenty thousand pounds for them.”

“You did,” rasped Kenyon, “and I told you to go to blazes!”

“Exactly!” smiled Zworge. “You probably thought I was either a madman or a foreign spy or something. Neither you nor the world had heard of me then. But, my friend, I was in deadly earnest. I wanted that earth crawler, and as you refused to do business with me I was forced to steal the plans.”

He slowly expelled a mouthful of cigarette-smoke, then resumed:

“To steal those plans from your safe in the War Office was a highly dangerous job, and one which imperilled my safety. Yet you left me no alternative, so when I did manage to steal the plans I determined to avenge myself on you by making it appear that you had sold them to me.”

“Which you did most successfully, you blackguard!” burst out Kenyon hoarsely.

“Yes, as you say, most successfully,” agreed Zworge, with a smile. “I planted in your rooms forged correspondence purporting to have passed between you and me about the sale of the plans. I also planted in your rooms a money draft on the Bank of Holland for twenty thousand pounds. The detectives investigating the mystery of the missing plans found the correspondence and the draft. You were promptly arrested——”

“And sentenced this afternoon to twenty years penal servitude, you rat!” cut in Kenyon savagely. “You’ve had your revenge all right!”

“Twenty years, was it?” observed Zworge interestedly. “I was on my way to rescue you, so I did not know the sentence. I suppose you were found guilty on all counts?”

“Yes, on all counts!” said Kenyon bitterly. “The court was convinced that I am a confederate of yours, curse you!”

“And will be more convinced than ever when they read the note I have left,” murmured Zworge. “The gas I used is not fatal, by the way. Nearly everyone will recover. I wanted you alive, consequently I merely used a stupefying gas.”

“Why do you want me alive?” rasped Kenyon.

“I will tell you,” said Zworge. “Those plans I stole were not complete. At the moment the Mole is not capable of remaining long under ground. The oxygen supply is not right, and all our efforts to adjust it have failed.”

“And you want me to fix it for you, eh?” cut in Kenyon. “I’ll see you in blazes first.”

“On the contrary, I’m convinced you will help me,” returned Zworge calmly. “The alternative will be a particularly horrible and painful death!”

“So that’s it, is it?” said Kenyon grimly. “Torture?”

“Yes, torture and death,” agreed Zworge. “On the other hand, if you do as I ask, you can either join my gang and share in the proceeds of our robberies, or I will give you ten

thousand pounds and smuggle you out of the country. You can choose whichever you wish!”

“You’ll get nothing out of me, you rat!” grated Kenyon.

“Wait!” said Zworge gently. “Consider your position. Why shouldn’t you join my gang? Everyone thinks you are already in league with me, so you have nothing to lose in that direction. The moment you show your nose anywhere you’ll be arrested. You haven’t a friend in the world——”

“That’s where you’re wrong!” cut in Kenyon with savage triumph. “I’ve got one friend, Bert Higgs, my late valet. He’s stuck to me through all this and believed in me!”

“Bert Higgs?” repeated Zworge, and Kenyon saw him exchange a smiling glance with the grinning men in the room. “If I were you, my friend, I shouldn’t rely too much on Bert Higgs!”

“What d’you mean by that?” demanded Kenyon sharply.

“Nothing, nothing!” murmured Zworge. “Don’t let us waste time in discussing a person of such little consequence as Bert Higgs. As I was saying, you have everything to gain by joining my gang. If you don’t wish to join it I will smuggle you out of the country with ten thousand pounds in your pocket. All I ask in return is that you fix our oxygen supply for us. Will you do it?”

“No!” shouted Kenyon fiercely. “I won’t!”

Zworge sucked on his cigarette until the end glowed crimson. Then with a swift movement he bent forward and thrust the glowing end between Kenyon’s fingers.

The agony was excruciating, and, in spite of himself, a groan broke from Kenyon’s livid lips.

“That is but a trifle of what you will suffer if you persist in your refusal,” purred Zworge, his evil face and glittering green eyes within inches of Kenyon’s. “I will give you until midnight to reconsider your decision!”

Straightening up, he turned and rapped out an order to the men. In response a couple of them approached Kenyon, and severing the bonds which bound him to the chair, jerked him to his feet.

His wrists were still lashed behind his back, however, and his ankles tied. Securely gagging him with a handkerchief, the men carried him along a dark and unfurnished hallway and up a wide and uncarpeted flight of stairs.

Zworge preceded them, carrying a small oil lamp with which to light the way, for every window was shuttered.

By the sickly illumination of the lamp Kenyon saw that dust lay everywhere, and he came to the conclusion that the place was some lonely and deserted house, probably situated in its own grounds somewhere out in the country.

Opening a door on the first floor, Zworge led the way into a room furnished with an iron bedstead, a table and a chair. The window was shuttered and the bare floorboards were thick with dust and littered with match and cigarette ends.

Setting down the lamp on the table, Zworge waited whilst the men deposited the helpless Kenyon on the bed.

“It still requires some hours until midnight,” he said. “A meal will be brought you. I

trust that when you are feeling more yourself you will decide to act sensibly and do what I ask!”

With that he strolled from the room at the heels of his men. The door closed, a key clicked in the lock, and Kenyon was left to himself and his thoughts.

So this was the end, he reflected bitterly. He was out of the frying pan into the fire with a vengeance. For if he refused to help Zworge, the rogue would certainly carry out his threat to kill him.

And on one thing Kenyon was grimly determined. In no circumstances would he help Zworge. The man could do his worst, could try torture if he wished, but he would get no assistance from Kenyon.

As he lay there staring at the small oil lamp on the table, a prey to black and brooding thought, a sudden glitter came to Kenyon's eyes.

Struggling to a sitting posture, he swung his bound feet to the floor. Straightening up, he swayed precariously on his feet, then, getting a grip on himself, hopped in the direction of the table.

He thanked his stars that the room was not above the kitchen, otherwise the thud of his feet must certainly have been heard by those below.

As it was he was none too sure that they wouldn't hear him in the deathly stillness of the house. Still, he had to risk that, and balancing himself, he took another forward hop.

By the time he reached the table he was in a cold sweat of excitement and apprehension. It would be heart-breaking were he to be discovered before he had a chance of carrying out his plan.

Sidling on to the table he moved his bound hands about behind him until they touched the hot glass funnel of the lamp. Then setting his teeth he carefully slid his fingers round the glass and eased it loose.

It was a difficult and agonising job to remove that funnel and place it on the table without breaking it. But Kenyon managed it, then, biting his lip to keep back a groan of pain, he moved his bound wrists until the naked flame of the wick was burning the rope.

The agony was terrible, but Kenyon could smell the burning fibre and resolutely he stuck this self-imposed torture which, with any luck, would mean his freedom.

At last the rope parted and his wrists were free. Loosening his gag, with a stifled groan of relief, Kenyon slid from the table. Stooping, he removed the bonds from about his ankles, then, straightening up, he crossed swiftly to the shuttered window.

The shutters were made of steel, locked and immovable. A hunted look in his eyes, Kenyon turned and stared round the room. The only way of escape was by means of the door, which was locked. To attempt to burst it open would assuredly bring Zworge and his men racing upstairs.

Kenyon stood a moment, his brain working at lightning speed. Then, crossing to the table, he replaced the funnel on the lamp, and, gathering up all the burnt fragments of rope, returned to the bed.

Stretching himself out on it, he replaced ropes and gag to give the impression that he was still tied. Then, with his hands behind him, he lay tense and motionless, waiting until someone should come.

Nor did he have long to wait, for to his straining ears came a mounting tread on the stairs, steps approached along the uncarpeted landing and the key clicked back in the lock.

The door swung open and a man appeared, a laden tray in his hands. Kicking shut the door behind him, he advanced to the table, and, setting down the tray, turned to Kenyon.

“I’ll loosen your hands,” he grinned, approaching the bed. “But don’t try any funny business, because I’m armed and you’ll get a bullet through you if you do. Come on, sit up!”

Kenyon sat up—or, rather, he shot up—and as though released by a powerful spring, his right arm whipped up with savage, smashing force.

Kenyon’s clenched and iron-hard fist took the man full on the jaw. He staggered wildly back, but before he could crash to the floor, Kenyon was on him, his lean fingers round the man’s throat in a vise-like strangling grip.

Whirling him round, Kenyon thrust him backwards across the bed, choking the life out of him with those terrible, throttling hands in which were concentrated all the bitter hate which he had for this infamous gang.

But already the man was unconscious. Releasing him, Kenyon stepped back a pace, passing a swollen and blistered hand shakily across his brow. Then swiftly he yanked the man’s gun from his pocket and crossed to the door.

Opening it a few inches, he listened intently. Not a sound came from below stairs. Taking the key from the lock, Kenyon inserted it on the inside of the door and turned it.

Crossing to the bed, he quickly gagged and bound the unconscious man, then munched a hasty snack taken from the tray.

A few moments later, having locked the door behind him, he was stealthily descending the stairs, his fingers curled round the trigger of his gun.

It was pitch dark in that lonely house of shuttered windows, and Kenyon had to grope his way down the uncarpeted stairs. More than once he paused, tense and rigid, as a board creaked beneath his cautious tread.

But nothing moved, nothing stirred, and gaining the hallway below, Kenyon crept along it towards the kitchen.

A chink of light was showing beneath the door. Kenyon’s fingers felt softly for the handle and fastened on it. Next instant, his gun raised menacingly, he flung the door open.

The kitchen was deserted!

On the table were signs of a recently consumed meal and the atmosphere was pungent with cigarette-smoke. It was evident that the kitchen had been but recently vacated.

Moving with cat-like stealth, Kenyon passed through the kitchen into a dimly lighted scullery. Instantly he drew back.

For the outer door of the scullery was open, and lounging there on the step, either on guard or enjoying the night air, was the figure of a man.

Kenyon could see the dark bulk of him silhouetted against the blue-black of the night sky. The fellow was leaning against the door-post, his back half-turned to Kenyon.

Gripping his gun by the barrel, Kenyon commenced to creep softly forward until he was within a few paces of the man. Then he leaped forward, his gun hand whipping up. The man whirled. For one split instant Kenyon saw the white blur of the fellow’s face,

then the butt of his weapon smashed savagely down.

With a sobbing moan the man pitched to his knees, sagged sideways, then rolled grotesquely down the step to the ground outside.

Bending over him, Kenyon searched him hurriedly for a weapon. He found a gun in the jacket pocket. Straightening up, he snapped it open.

There were six cartridges in the chamber. That, with the gun Kenyon already possessed, meant twelve bullets. And he had already accounted for two of the eight men.

With head inclined, Kenyon now listened intently. From somewhere near at hand came a muffled, metallic hammering. Pausing a moment to get his bearings, Kenyon set off in the direction of the sound.

There loomed into view a large square building like a big workshop or garage. There were no windows, or if there were they were shuttered. But light was streaming out from the front of the building, and gliding forward, Kenyon halted in the black shadow of a bush outside the radius of light.

From where he crouched he could command a view of the interior of the building, which was fitted with benches and lathes around the walls. But what drew Kenyon's glittering gaze was the long, cylindrical body of the Mole resting there on the concrete floor.

Zworge was standing near the earth crawler, talking to two of the dungaree-clad men. It was from the interior of the Mole that the hammering was proceeding; proof that the other men were working there.

A gun in each hand and his fingers round the triggers, Kenyon stepped swiftly forward.

“Up with your hands, Zworge,” he snarled, “or I'll blow your brains out!”

With an oath Zworge whirled, his face livid, his hand streaking to his pocket. Even as Kenyon's guns roared, Zworge hurled himself aside towards the lighting switch, lurid flame spurting from his pocket as he fired at Kenyon.

Something struck Kenyon in the shoulder, searing with the agony of white-hot metal and half-twisting him round. In that same split-fraction of time, before he could recover, the lights snapped out, plunging the building into inky darkness.

CHAPTER II

THE MANACLED MAN

KENYON flung himself flat on his face. The game had been his, and he had bungled it. Zworge's iron nerve and amazing swiftness had turned the tables.

Kenyon daren't even fire now, for the stabbing flame from his gun would give his position away and draw the deadly, concentrated fire of Zworge and his men. The hammering inside the Mole had ceased with the first shot fired, and the men had climbed out.

The warm blood from his wounded shoulder trickled down Kenyon's arm, and the arm itself was becoming stiff and numb. If he was to get out of this alive he must act—and act quickly.

Lowering his face to the hand of his undamaged arm, he gripped the hot barrel of the gun with his teeth. Then, not daring to make a sound, he eased his arm inwards, groping with his fingers for a pencil in his waistcoat pocket.

Withdrawing the pencil, he jerked it away from him with a flick of his wrist. It fell with a faint clatter on the concrete which fronted the building.

Instantly the darkness was riven by lurid, stabbing flame, and the building reverberated to the crash of guns, as Zworge and his men fired in the direction of the sound.

Bounding to his feet, Kenyon emptied his guns towards them and leapt aside. A man screamed, and from another came a choking gurgle.

Bullets whistled over the spot from which Kenyon had fired, but Kenyon was no longer there. His movements covered by the roar of the guns, he had glided swiftly into the building.

Now his outstretched hand touched the hull of the Mole. He backed against it, sidling along it inch by inch and foot by foot. His hands behind him groped suddenly in space. He had reached the open doorway in the hull. It was he who had designed the Mole, and he knew every bolt and rivet of her.

With heart beating exultantly, Kenyon stepped backwards into the hull. His fingers moved over the smooth steel plates, seeking the electric button which controlled the door.

They touched it, there came a soft, sliding sound, then a click as the door locked shut.

With a triumphant laugh, Kenyon pressed the switch which controlled the lighting, and the warm and glistening interior of the Mole was flooded with brilliant illumination.

One swift and searching glance round assured Kenyon that he was alone in the hull. The ports were closed as well as the door, and not a chink of light could show outside.

Stepping swiftly to the instrument board which fronted the control wheel and shining control levers, Kenyon glanced at the gleaming array of dials and gauges.

The main electric batteries which drove the bladed outer casing and the gyroscopic motors were three-quarters charged. The auxiliary batteries were fully charged, and satisfied that he had all the power he needed, Kenyon turned to the oxygen gauge. It was

very low, but that didn't matter much. There would be only himself to use the precious life-giving gas.

The fuel tanks which provided the power to drive the caterpillar treads were practically full, and the depth gauges, pressure gauges, barometers and thermometers appeared to be working satisfactorily.

The gyro-compass synchronised with the compass on the instrument board and both the speedometer and evolution indicator were connected up.

As far as Kenyon could see by his rapid and expert survey, the Mole was ready to be driven, and stepping to the nearest starboard port, he slid it open the fraction of an inch.

As the thin but brilliant chink of light split the darkness outside there came a startled shout and the lights of the building blazed on.

"Are you there, Zworge?" called Kenyon.

One bound took Zworge to the slightly opened port. His green eyes were blazing, his swarthy face maniacal with rage.

"You, Kenyon?" he choked. "Listen. I want to talk to you. Don't be a fool. You can't get away with this——"

"If you mean I can't get away with the Mole, you're mistaken!" cut in Kenyon. "You'll see that in a minute. What I want to tell you is this. I'm going to prove you faked that evidence against me and I'm going to send you and your gang to the scaffold——"

He broke off as Zworge whirled on his men, screaming:

"Close the doors, you fools!"

Slamming shut the port, Kenyon leapt for the control switch. If that order of Zworge's meant anything at all, it meant that the doors were constructed of as tough a metal as was the Mole.

Even as the motors whirred into life and the caterpillar treads slid out, the doors dropped like a solid curtain of steel in front of the earth crawler.

Crouched in the control seat, his face grim and set, Kenyon whipped the control lever, full open and drove the Mole straight at the doors.

There came a deafening crash, a violent jar which flung him forward across the wheel, then to the scream of tortured metal and the roar of falling girders the doors flattened outwards with a thunderous crash and the earth crawler rumbled away into the night, smashing down trees and bushes before the white-faced Kenyon could switch on the powerful headlights.

Ahead of him was a high wall which obviously encircled the grounds in which the house stood. Kenyon smashed through the wall, rumbled across a road and took the Mole sliding down into a field.

Cutting out the caterpillar motors, Kenyon pressed a switch. The treads slid back into the hull and the bladed outer casing locked into place and commenced to revolve.

Faster and faster it spun, and as the black, conical nose dropped under the pull of the gyro-motor, the whirling blades bit deeply into the ground, and the Black Mole vanished from out of the night, burrowing its way down into the deep and secret bowels of the earth.

If Kenyon had had time for more than a swift, searching glance round this amazing

machine which he had designed, he would probably have looked into the small, curtained sleeping quarters which were situated aft.

But there had been no time for that, and as the Mole bored its way down into the earth, Kenyon was quite oblivious of a pair of burning eyes which glared at him in hate through a chink in the curtains of one of the compartments.

They were the eyes of a man who, ever since the Mole had started on this fateful trip, had been writhing frenziedly on the floor in a desperate effort to free himself from handcuffs and manacles.

He had already succeeded in getting one hand free, and by a sudden almost superhuman effort which brought a stifled groan of pain to his lips, he managed to wrench his feet free from the ankle manacles.

For a few moments he sat massaging the bruised and broken skin of his ankles with his free hand, then, stealthily drawing aside the curtain, he commenced to crawl towards Kenyon, who was blissfully unaware of his presence aboard.

Nearer and nearer the man drew to Kenyon, the handcuffs trailing from his left wrist, a heavy spanner in his other hand.

When only a pace separated him from Kenyon he rose softly to his feet, raising the spanner for a savage downward blow which would smash Kenyon's skull.

And in that same instant Kenyon saw him, glimpsing the man's hate-contorted face in the mirror of the dashboard.

It was Bert Higgs, his late valet—the one man whom Kenyon had looked upon as friend!

With a wild cry Kenyon hurled himself aside. But, already the heavy spanner was whirling down with savage force.

Had Kenyon delayed the fraction of a second the heavy spanner would have crashed down on his head. As it was, the spanner caught his arm, nearly breaking it, as he hurled himself aside.

Oblivious to the pain, Kenyon leapt to his feet. Whirling, he seized Bert by the throat and forced him back against the batteries which lined the side of the control room.

“So you're against me as well?” he rasped, his face convulsed with passion.

Bert was glaring at him with protruding eyes, striving desperately to tear Kenyon's hands away from his throat. He tried to shake his head, tried to speak, but all he could get out was a horrible, choking sound.

“Tried to kill me, did you?” grated Kenyon. “I suppose Zworge's bought you, like he tried to buy me!”

Bert struggled frantically. With one last despairing effort he brought his knee up with vicious force, catching Kenyon full in the stomach. Kenyon doubled up, gasping in agony, and Bert tore himself free.

“Listen, sir—listen!” he croaked, one shaking hand outstretched as though to ward Kenyon off. “I didn't know it was you—honest, I didn't!”

“You saw me come aboard, didn't you?” demanded Kenyon harshly.

“No, no; that's just it, I didn't!” panted Bert. “I was lying 'andcuffed in one of them compartments there. I was, honest!”

Kenyon stared at him and saw for the first time the handcuffs dangling from Bert's wrist.

"Just what's the idea?" he rasped.

"Stop the Mole!" panted Bert. "Stop 'er, sir, and I'll tell you!"

Kenyon wheeled. Two strides took him to the control switch. He cut out the motors, and in the deathly stillness which followed, he turned to Bert.

"Well?" he said grimly.

"It was like this 'ere, sir," said Bert, tenderly massaging his throat. "I was kidnapped by Zworge and 'is gang. Yessir, it's a fact. Last night it was, when I was 'aving a bit of a walk before turning in. They jumped out of a car, bashed me over the head, and the next thing I knew was that I was in that perishin' house of his."

"But why the dickens did Zworge kidnap you?" demanded Kenyon staring.

"To fix his oxygen plant for 'im, sir," explained Bert. "They knew I 'elped you build that first experimental model what you made, and they knew I could fix the oxygen cylinders for them!"

"Yes, and what happened?" asked Kenyon.

"Why, nothing 'appened, sir," replied Bert. "Leastways, not much. I told Zworge and the whole lot of 'em to go to blazes. Zworge said he'd deal with me later, and they 'andcuffed me and slung me aboard the Mole 'ere."

"And you've been here ever since?" demanded Kenyon.

"Yessir. I was aboard when they raided the Tower. I couldn't see anything, but I 'eard them talking, and I knew what they was up to."

"And when you saw me sitting at the controls just now you thought I was one of Zworge's gang?"

"I thought you was Zworge 'imself, sir. You don't look unlike 'im, not from the back, you don't!"

"Thanks for the compliment!" said Kenyon, with a grim smile. "I'm glad I only look like him from the back. Do you know the result of my trial, Bert?"

"Yes; you got twenty years' penal servitude," said Bert. "I 'eard them saying so when they was working inside the Mole to-night."

"Yes, twenty years," nodded Kenyon. "I'm now an escaped convict, Bert, so I'm going to take the Mole to the surface, drop you out, and you're going straight home!"

"Oh, am I?" said Bert sharply. "And what might you be going to do, sir?"

"Me?" said Kenyon, his hands clenching. "I'm not going to rest until I've rounded up Zworge and his gang and proved to the world that I was absolutely innocent of the charges brought against me."

"And I'm with you, sir!" said Bert heartily. "We'll fix that bunch of crooks, somehow _____"

"There's no 'we' about it!" cut in Kenyon. "Why, man, don't you realise I'm an escaped convict? You'll go to prison as well as me, if we're caught. I've not only got Zworge after me. I've got the police chasing me, as well!"

"The more the merrier, sir," grinned Bert. "You can't get rid of me, no matter 'ow 'ard

you try. No, gov'nor, I'm the one man what's always believed in you, and the worse you're up against it, the closer I'll stick to you!"

Kenyon stepped forward and took him by the shoulder.

"You're a good chap, Bert," he said softly, "and you know how I feel about it. Right-ho, we'll fight Zworge together. Now let me file that handcuff off, then we'll take the Mole up and get our bearings. Do you happen to know where that house of Zworge's is situated?"

"No, gov'nor, I don't," replied Bert, as Kenyon got busy with a file. "It was a closed car that they used to take me there in. I couldn't see anything. But I'll tell you this, that house is a proper fortress!"

"What d'you mean?" demanded Kenyon.

"I mean, the walls, as well as the shutters and the doors, are all made of steel," said Bert. "You wouldn't think so to look at 'em, but they are. The house is disguised to look rickety and tumbledown, but it could stand a siege, that house could."

"Well, we'll go up and see just whereabouts it lies," said Kenyon, as the filed manacles fell from Bert's wrist.

Reseating himself at the controls of the Black Mole, he switched on the motors and pulled the lever which controlled the gyro-balance. Bert, standing beside him, felt the floor tilting as the earth crawler bored its way upwards to the surface.

"I've not the slightest idea where we are," said Kenyon grimly. "I hope to goodness we don't come out under somebody's house, or in the middle of a village street, or somewhere like that!"

The depth gauge was registering less than ten feet, and a moment later the black, whirling, conical nose of the earth crawler burst up through the ground.



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“GOSH, THAT ONE NEARLY HAD US.”

CHAPTER III

THE ATTACK!

CONSTABLE PEABODY, the fat policeman of Little Muttering, had a soft job.

There were never any thieves or burglars around Little Muttering, and, apart from having an occasional offender up in front of the beaks for riding without a light, or for not having a dog licence, Constable Peabody found life very uninteresting.

On this particular night he was pacing slowly along the road, enjoying the moon, and wondering if it would be safe to have a quiet smoke.

You never knew what nosy parkers were snooping about, and if he was reported for smoking on duty he'd get into a row. Deciding to risk it, Constable Peabody leaned against the gate of a field and drew a packet of fags from a pocket beneath his tunic.

Then suddenly the half-opened packet dropped from his nerveless hand, and he stood gaping in open-mouthed astonishment. For to his ears had come a dull, whirring noise, and a large black cone of whirling steel shot up through the ground in the centre of the field, sending earth and turf flying.

"Well, I'll be blown!" gasped Constable Peabody.

A huge, black monster of steel heaved itself up from out of the ground, and came to rest in the middle of the field. The constable stared in awed astonishment, then suddenly let out a strangled ejaculation and dropped on his knees behind the gate.

For he knew now what this queer monster was. He had been warned to look out for it, as had every policeman and civilian in the country, by means of a police message broadcast that very evening.

It was the Black Mole—the infamous earth crawler with which Zworge had raided the Tower of London, and carried away his accomplice, Robert Kenyon.

Kenyon wasn't Zworge's accomplice, but the whole country thought he was.

Kneeling there behind the gate, peering stupidly through the bars, the fat constable's brain worked at lightning-like speed. At least, it was lightning-like speed for him, which isn't saying much really.

One thing was quite certain to him. He couldn't tackle and capture the whole gang single-handed, for he hadn't the slightest doubt that Zworge and his gangsters were inside the earth crawler.

What was it the broadcast message had said? "Anyone sighting the earth crawler, or discovering its whereabouts, should communicate with Scotland Yard without delay."

Right! That's what he'd do!

Crawling away until the hedge hid him from the view of anyone emerging from the earth crawler, Constable Peabody got to his feet. Then with elbows tucked in, his helmet bobbing on the back of his head, and his face as red as a Dutch cheese, he tore along the road, burst into his cottage, and grabbed the telephone receiver.

"Scotland Yard! Hallo! Is that Scotland Yard?" he babbled. "This is Constable Peabody, of Little Muttering, in Kent. The earth crawler's here. Yes, in a field near here.

What? Get every able-bodied man and try to capture it? All right. What's that? Detective-Inspector Carter's leaving right away by fast car? All right. Tell him to come quick!"

Replacing the receiver, Peabody leaned against the wall, puffing and panting and mopping, with his handkerchief, at his perspiring face.

But there was no time to lose. Quitting the cottage, he went hastily in search of all the able-bodied men in the place, and within a remarkable short space of time Constable Peabody found himself in command of a posse numbering fifteen all told.

Some were armed with sticks, some with scythes, one or two with old-fashioned fowling-pieces, and Mark Mattley, the poacher, turned out with a smart, double-barrelled sporting gun.

"Now what we've got to do," said Peabody, "is to creep up on 'em unawares and rush 'em. There's a wood on the other side of that field, so we'll go across the fields, sneak up on 'em through the wood, and rush 'em before they know where they are. Are you ready?"

"Ay!" quavered the posse.

"Come on, then!" said Constable Peabody. "And remember the Government's offered ten thousand pounds for the capture of Zworge and his earth crawler."

Meanwhile, the door in the hull of the Black Mole had slid open, and Kenyon and Bert had cautiously emerged. Kenyon had emptied his guns back there at Zworge's house, and Bert didn't possess one.

"I wonder where we are?" said Bert, staring around the sleeping and moon-bathed countryside.

"I'm going to find out," said Kenyon grimly. "Yonder's a road. There may be a signpost or something. You stay here and keep your eyes open."

Left to himself, Bert watched Kenyon's well-knit figure striding swiftly away across the moonlit field. Bert was uneasy. It was taking a terrible risk, coming to the surface of the ground like this, but they had to do it if they were to get their bearings.

Bert fervently hoped Kenyon wouldn't be long. He saw him vault the gate and disappear from view. Bert started to walk round the Mole. Suddenly he halted, tense and rigid, staring at the dark wood less than thirty paces away.

Was he mistaken, or had something moved in the black shadow of that wood? With hands clenched and face grim and set, Bert listened with straining ears.

He could hear rustlings—faint whisperings. There was someone there—men!

Bert slid to the end of the Mole and peered desperately towards the gate. There was no sign of Kenyon. Bert dare not call to him; to do so might start a rush by the unseen watchers.

Not knowing what to do, and with heart thumping painfully, Bert glared back towards the trees. Then he caught his breath. The men were coming. He could see their vague and shadowy forms moving cautiously from cover, making towards the Mole.

Then they came with a rush—a swift and silent rush which would have caught Bert napping had he not already spotted them.

Bert let out a yell:

"We're attacked, sir!"

Far through the still night air rang that desperate, warning shout, and with it sounded the heavy roar of the fowling-pieces and the vicious crack of Mark Mattley's gun.

Small shot thudded and whanged against the outer casing of the Black Mole, and the night was rent by the land, stabbing flashes of the guns.

Bert leapt frantically for the door in the hull, but realising now that they had few to deal with, the attacking party came on with a frenzied rush.

Before Bert could slide the door shut, three men were clamouring at it, their pushing, jostling bodies preventing it from closing.

Bert could see the white blur of their faces, and he lashed out savagely with his fists. One man staggered back, spitting broken teeth and curses, but another took his place.

They were fighting desperately to get into the Mole, and Bert was fighting desperately to keep them out. As he drove his fists again and again into their faces he was thanking his lucky stars that the lights in the hull had been switched off before he and Kenyon had emerged.

The attackers couldn't see him as he could see them against the background of moonlight, and, knowing that his very life depended on it, Bert fought like a madman.

A scythe blade stabbed wickedly at him, the curved and gleaming steel tearing cruelly down his arm. Blind to the pain, oblivious to the gashes in his hands, Bert seized the scythe and tore it from the hands of his assailant. But that manoeuvre looked like costing him dear, for he was borne back into the black interior of the Mole by a sudden concerted rush.

Leaping clear, Bert whirled the scythe with deadly intent. Men screamed and shrieked in agony and terror as that dreadful, cleaving blade cut through the inky darkness. Those with guns dare not fire in case they shot their own comrades. Panic seized them, spread like wildfire, and with yells of fear and panic they fell back.

Out into the field they poured, and, with a sobbing gasp of relief, Bert pressed home the switch which controlled the door. It slid shut, locked into place, and next instant the interior of the Mole was flooded with brilliant illumination as Bert switched on the lights.

Where Kenyon was, Bert did not know; but he knew enough about his guv'nor to know that he would find some way of getting back to the Mole if it was humanly possible. At the moment, the first thing to be done was to scatter this bunch of fellows outside.

Sinking into the control seat, Bert switched on the motors of the caterpillar treads and pressed the switch which controlled the headlights.

Sliding back the steel shutters and the glass windows of the look-out ports, Bert whirled the control wheel. Then, like a live thing, the earth crawler drove straight at the frantic Peabody and his posse.

They broke and fled with shouts of terror, and with a tight-lipped grin, Bert swung the Mole towards the gate over which Kenyon had vaulted.

As he approached it, he saw Kenyon come running towards him; and in that same moment he saw the headlights of two powerful cars approaching along the road at terrific speed. Behind Kenyon, also, were racing the remnants of Peabody's posse, eager to capture at least one of the gang.

Bert was in a quandary, wondering what to do. If he stopped and opened the door of

the Mole, Kenyon would be caught before he could get inside. In desperation Bert slowed down, and Kenyon leapt for the small look-out port, hanging on to it with his hands.

“Keep going!” he bawled at Bert. “I’m getting on top!”

As Kenyon swung himself up and slithered on to the smooth, curved top of the earth crawler, the two cars pulled up with a screaming of brakes at the gate of the field, and from them came spurts of orange flame as Inspector Carter and his men opened fire with revolvers at the strange, black monster.

“So that’s your game, is it?” grated Bert, scared stiff in case Kenyon should be hit by that deadly fire.

As far as Bert could see, there was only one thing to be done. Giving the motors every ounce of power, he drove the earth crawler straight at the cars.

The gate of the field splintered into fragments as the Black Mole charged through it, with Kenyon sprawled on top. Then, as the plainclothes police leapt for their lives, the earth crawler smashed into the nearer car, crushing it into a wrecked and twisted mass of metal.

Wheeling, the Mole lumbered its way over the second car, crushing it like the foot of an adult flattening a child’s tin toy, then crashing its way through the hedge, the earth crawler drove back across the field, travelling at a speed which hopelessly outdistanced the frantic men pursuing it.

Bert put four fields between the Mole and its pursuers before he slowed down to a crawl. Then, leaving the controls, he slid open the door.

“Are you there, guv’nor?” he called anxiously.

“Yes, here!” panted Kenyon, leaping to the ground and running for the door. “Phew! that was a near go, Bert! We’ve got to take her under again. The whole countryside’ll be roused now!”

“We can’t take her down,” said Bert grimly. “We’ve got no oxygen left!”

Kenyon sprang to the instrument board. The oxygen gauge was standing at zero. The cylinders were empty.

“It can’t be helped, Bert!” said Kenyon desperately. “We’ve got to go underground. If we stay up here we’ll be caught!”

“And if we go down we’ll be suffocated!” retorted Bert.

“The hull’s full of air,” cried Kenyon. “There’s oxygen in that. I know where we are, and Hogberry Woods are less than three miles from here. If we can reach them we can come up in the middle of the woods, and that’ll give us a breather!”

“O.K., guv’nor, you set the course!” said Bert. “Gosh! I wonder how them fellers got on to us?”

“Because the whole country’s looking for us, that’s how!” said Kenyon, switching on the gyro-motors. “That sort of thing will happen wherever we show our nose!”

“Cheerful, ain’t it?” grinned Bert, as the Mole tilted and the whirling blades of her outer casing drove her down into the earth. “But we’ll win through, guv’nor, don’t you worry!”

“We’ve got one chance in a million of doing it, Bert,” replied Kenyon grimly, as the Mole bored her way easily through the chalk which lay twenty feet below the surface.

“What’s the plan of campaign, guv’nor?”

“First, to get proof of my innocence,” replied Kenyon. “When we’ve got this oxygen plant fixed, I’m going to find Zworge’s stronghold and raid it. There’s bound to be papers of some description there. I’ll let the world know the truth somehow!”

He passed a hand wearily across his brow. He was beginning to feel dull and sleepy. It was the lack of oxygen in the atmosphere, for the motors were using up a lot of it.

“All right, Bert?” he asked.

“Y-yes!” mumbled Bert.

Kenyon glanced over his shoulder at him. Bert was seated on a locker, his head sunk on his chest.

“Getting kind of warm in ’ere, ain’t it?” he mumbled.

Kenyon made no response, but turned again to the controls. He was thankful that the earth crawler had only soft chalk to bore through, and not solid rock.

She was moving fast, and, with his eyes on the compass and speedometer, Kenyon suddenly pulled the lever which controlled the gyro-motor.

The whirling, conical nose of the Mole lifted, boring its way up through solid whiteness from a distance of eighty feet below the ground.

Kenyon’s eyes were now on the depth indicator, watching the pointer slide back to sixty feet—thirty feet—ten feet——

He pulled over the motor switch, and, with blades slowly revolving, the Mole gently thrust its nose up out of the ground.

Stopping the motors, Kenyon slid back the steel shutters of the look-out ports and peered out. He did not dare switch on his headlights, but through the thick glass he caught a glimpse of moonlight sky through the leafy branches of trees.

He had judged the course correctly. The Mole had come up somewhere in Hogberry Woods, and as her blades began to revolve again, she heaved her glistening, black hull out of the ground and came to rest in a dense thicket.

From then until dawn, Kenyon worked on the oxygen plant, whilst Bert patrolled the undergrowth, keeping his ears strained for anyone approaching.

“It was the generating motor that was giving the trouble,” said Kenyon, as Bert returned to the Mole with the first faint light of dawn. “I’ve fixed it and adjusted the vent valves, but we’ve got no oxygen, Bert!”

“And we can’t go underground without any,” said Bert. “What’s to be done, guv’nor?”

“Just this,” said Kenyon. “Zworge’s house is within a ten miles radius of here. I’m convinced of that. I’m going to have a look for it on foot, and you’re going to stay here with the Mole. If you hear anyone coming, take her under. When I’ve located Zworge’s stronghold we’ll raid it under cover of night, keeping the Mole above ground as far as possible——”

Abruptly he broke off as there came to his and Bert’s ears the sound of a powerful aero-engine approaching in their direction.

“That fellow’s flying low!” exclaimed Kenyon sharply.

The noise was growing swiftly in volume, and a few moments later a black monoplane

roared low overhead. They could see the helmeted head of the pilot as he peered down, then a black cylindrical object dropped from his bomb-rack.

It hurtled down into the wood near where Kenyon and Bert were standing, and there came a deafening explosion. A tree fell with a crash, and, as Kenyon and Bert dived for the Mole, another bomb dropped and exploded with a terrifying roar.

“It’s Zworge!” panted Kenyon, sliding shut the door of the Mole and leaping for the controls. “He’d know we had no oxygen and would have to come up. It’s not an Air Force machine!”

The words were drowned in another deafening roar of high-explosive. The Mole rocked and almost overturned as the ground near her was blown into a flaming crater. An uprooted tree fell on her with a sickening crash.

“We’ve got to go down!” grated Kenyon, switching on the motor. “Gosh, that one nearly had us!”

There was another nerve-shattering roar, and again the Mole lurched as another tree crashed down upon her, filling the hull with thunderous echoes.

But under the pull of her gyro-motor she already had her nose down, and as her whirling blades cut through the trees like paper and bit deep into the earth, she bored down into the depths, a hunted, fugitive monster of solid steel.

“And wot now?” demanded Bert. “Looks as if Mister Perishin’ Zworge’s holding all the trumps. We ain’t got no oxygen, so we can’t stay down, and if we come up he’ll blow us to blazes!”

“We’ll keep going!” said Kenyon grimly, driving the Mole deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth.

He knew only too well their deadly peril. They could not stay down long—half an hour at the most—and they dare not come up, for apart from Zworge’s bombs there was the danger of the Mole breaking surface near some village, or even in the main street of some town.

Exactly where she did come up depended entirely on just how long the oxygen in the air inside the hull lasted. Kenyon knew the countryside well enough to know that apart from Hogberry Woods there was no other cover for them at all. When they did come up they must come up in the open. And if he was seen he would be promptly arrested and thrown into prison. Or most likely he would be hanged after what had happened in the court-room of the Tower of London.

“There’s one thing, Bert,” he said suddenly. “Apart from that fight in the field, the police have nothing against you!”

“And ain’t that enough?” demanded Bert. “I outed a few of ’em good and proper. I’ll get it properly in the neck for that. Not that I cares, guv’nor. I’d rather go to prison with you than be on my own outside!”

“Well, it’s either prison or death,” said Kenyon grimly. “We can’t stay down much longer, Bert!”

Bert knew the truth of that. Already the air in the Mole was becoming exhausted.

If only they could get hold of a few cylinders of oxygen they would be safe. The precious, life-giving gas would enable them to travel miles underground before breaking

surface. And there was oxygen at Zworge's house.

But it was hopeless to think of that. Although they knew that Zworge's stronghold was somewhere near, they hadn't the faintest idea in which direction it lay.

Seated on a locker, his hands in his pockets, Bert felt himself drifting off into the sleep from which there would be no awaking.

Kenyon's voice came to him, faint and far away, it seemed to Bert:

"I'm going to surface, Bert!"

Bert mumbled something unintelligible. Vaguely he wondered how Kenyon could keep the Mole going as he himself was about all in. Even the sound of the motors was deadened; he couldn't hear them now.

Bert's eyes jerked open, and he blinked up at Kenyon. He hadn't seen Kenyon approach him, but Kenyon was standing over him and shaking him savagely.

"Eh?" grunted Bert, his head lolling.

"Pull yourself together, man!" gasped Kenyon, swaying on his feet. "Something's happened. We're a thousand feet under the ground, and I've either gone mad and am seeing things, or—or there's men out there!"

Bert stared at him uncomprehendingly. Exerting all his remaining strength, Kenyon hauled him to his feet. Obeying Kenyon's tug at his arm, Bert stumbled towards the look-out ports.

Then he halted, staring in bewildered amaze. For outside the Mole was an eerie, fiery glow, and in its lurid illumination Bert could see the frenzied, contorted faces pressed against the glass of the look-out windows.

"What—what are they, guv'nor?" he mumbled.

"They're men!" gasped Kenyon. "Men—and fire down here in the bowels of the earth!"

CHAPTER IV

THE INFERNO

“ARE they—are they human?” gasped Bert hoarsely.

“Yes, they’re human all right,” replied Kenyon grimly, staring at the queer, red glow beyond the faces which were pressed against the look-out windows of the Black Mole. “By Jove! I’ve got it, Bert!”

His fingers tightened on Bert’s arm.

“D’you know what this is?” rasped Kenyon. “It’s a coal mine, and it’s on fire. There’s been an accident. These men are trapped!”

Bert, staring through the look-out window, realised the truth of Kenyon’s grim words. In her blind burrowing through the bowels of the earth, the Mole had smashed her way into a working of a coal mine where the burning roof had fallen, imprisoning the miners in a dreadful, fiery tomb.

“What are we going to do, guv’nor?” asked Bert hoarsely.

“Help them!” replied Kenyon. “Get them aboard and take the Mole up!”

Bert stared at him, his face white, a hundred questions trembling on his livid lip.

To take the Mole up was madness. Above the surface would be crowds of people gathered round the pithead. The Mole would be seized the instant it broke ground and Kenyon and Bert would be arrested.

But could these men be left down there to die when only the Mole could save them? No, not even if twenty years’ penal servitude apiece was to be the outcome of it for Kenyon and Bert.

Wrenching open the sliding door in the hull of the Mole, Kenyon stumbled out into the lurid inferno of crimson smoke and deadly gas caused by the burning coal and slag.

“In here, men!” he gasped. “I’ve no oxygen—but I’ll get you to the surface if I can. For pity’s sake, hurry!”

Nearly all in himself, he guided the men into the Mole. There were a dozen of them all told. Eight were on their feet, two had to be supported, and the remaining two were carried in.

“Is that the lot?” croaked Kenyon, turning to a grey-haired veteran miner who seemed about the toughest of them all.

“Yes, that’s all!” replied the miner.

Groping for the switch which controlled the door, Kenyon pressed it. The door slid shut, and as Kenyon switched the motors the blades whirled into life and the Mole commenced to bore her way out of that underground inferno.

The atmosphere inside the hull was as foul and hot as it had been in the burning mine, and the rescued men gasped and groaned with the agony of tortured lungs.

Kenyon and Bert were on the point of collapse and Kenyon was handling the controls mechanically. But the Mole was boring her way upwards although what would happen when she burst through the surface of the ground Kenyon dared not think.

The grey-haired old miner staggered to where Kenyon was slumped in the control seat.

“We didn’t expect this from you, mister,” he croaked.

Kenyon’s lips twisted in a mirthless grin.

“Why not?” he asked weakly.

“Well, you’re—you’re Zworge, aren’t you?” said the other.

“No, I’m not Zworge,” replied Kenyon haltingly. “I am the man who was rescued from the Tower. Zworge is my enemy—he rescued me for his own purpose—I was innocent of the charges brought against me——”

The words trailed away. He hadn’t the strength to go on. Talking sapped his fast diminishing strength in that foul and poisonous atmosphere.

But there was something he wanted to know—something about Zworge.

“Listen!” he gasped. “Do you know a big, deserted house near here—a house surrounded by a high wall?”

“There’s only one deserted house that I know of,” replied the miner wonderingly, “and that’s Hangman’s Hall. Why d’you ask?”

“That’ll be it!” muttered Kenyon, to himself. “That’ll be Zworge’s headquarters!”

The depth gauge was now registering less than six feet and next instant the black, whirling conical-shaped nose of the Mole burst through the surface of the ground. The long cylindrical monster heaved itself up from out the bowels of the earth, to come to rest in a field within a quarter of a mile of the pithead.

Raising his hand in one last feeble effort, Kenyon pressed the switch which controlled the door in the hull. The door slid back, and as the clean, life-giving air poured into the Mole, Kenyon stared out with bloodshot eyes.

“I guess it’s all up!” he muttered grimly, for the Mole had been sighted by the crowds gathered at the pithead and men and women were streaming across the field towards it.

There was no time for Kenyon and Bert to get the semi-conscious miners out of the earth crawler and escape. There was nothing to be done now except submit to arrest. But as the foremost of the excited crowd dashed up to the Mole, the veteran miner thrust Kenyon aside and stepped in front of him with arms outflung.

“Stop!” he shouted, facing the crowd. “Listen, mates. This man has saved us from death—every one of us who was trapped in the working. He isn’t Zworge. He’s the man who escaped from the Tower. He says he’s innocent and I believe him. Give him a chance, mates!”

The crowd gaped, dumbfounded, and then a woman whose son had been rescued by the Mole screamed:

“You’re right, Joe! Let him go. He’s saved our lads for us!”

Other voices roared agreement and, with relief in his heart, Kenyon leaned weakly against the hull of the Mole as a group of men rushed into the steel monster and commenced to bring out the rescued miners.

Then suddenly Kenyon’s eyes narrowed and his haggard face became grim and set. For a police car had dashed up to the field and from it jumped Inspector Carter of Scotland Yard, and four plainclothes policemen.

It was obvious what had happened. Inspector Carter, touring the district in search of the Mole, had been attracted to the scene either by the pit disaster or by the earth crawler's sudden appearance above ground.

"Make way!" cried Inspector Carter, commencing to elbow his way through the crowd. "Any man obstructing us will be taken into custody!"

But a foot tripped him here, an elbow thrust him back there, and broad shoulders barred the passage of him and his men as they fought desperately to reach the Mole.

Meanwhile, encouraged by the frenzied urgings of the grey-haired veteran, the rescued miners were being carried out of the earth crawler as swiftly as possible.

Inspector Carter, purplish with rage and exertion, was less than five paces from the Mole when the last man was carried out.

"There you are!" rapped the veteran, wheeling on Kenyon. "In you get and the best of luck to you!"

For one precious instant of time his honest, toil-worn hand held Kenyon's in a firm and crushing grip. Then, as Kenyon leapt into the Mole, the inspector flung aside the last man who barred his passage.

Even as he reached the door, however, it slid shut with a clang and Kenyon and Bert were safe inside. A moment later the blades began slowly to revolve, and under the pull of her gyro-motor the Mole dipped her whirling nose and disappeared from view with a flying cloud of earth and turf, leaving a vast but rapidly-filling hole.

Inside the great steel monster the air was fresh once again, but the oxygen would not last long.

"And that Scotland Yard man and his detectives will be waiting for us to come up again," grinned Kenyon. "But we'll beat them this time, Bert!"

"How, guv'nor?" demanded Bert, staring.

"By finding a disused working which hasn't been affected by the disaster," explained Kenyon. "Every mine has dozens of disused workings with ventilation shafts. We'll bore around until we find one, and we'll lie low there until nightfall. We'll keep the ports open to let some air into the Mole."

"And when night comes?" demanded Bert.

"We'll raid Hangman's Hall and grab Zworge and his crew," said Kenyon grimly.

About twenty minutes later, after boring through the tunnels and galleries of the mine, the Mole came to rest in a damp and stone-sided working deep down in the bowels of the earth.

By nightfall both men were fit and refreshed after a well-earned sleep. Both, however, were tremendously hungry, for it was long since they had eaten.

"There'll be no grub at Hangman's Hall!" observed Kenyon, studying a map which he had taken from the chart locker.

A few minutes later the Mole was crawling slowly along the working in the direction of the distant pit shaft. Searchlights were switched on, and as it turned into one of the main workings, Kenyon saw a crowd of men in gas masks working with picks and drills.

"They're the safety men trying to prevent the fire spreading," he said to Bert, and pulled back the motor switch until the Mole was moving dead slow.

There was no room in the working for both the men and the monster of steel, and the men were forced to retreat before its slow approach.

They were in no danger, however, and, clustered by the cage at the bottom of the shaft, they saw the earth crawler suddenly swing its whirling, conical nose and commence to burrow its way into the solid rock and stone which formed the side of the working.

It was impossible for any of the men to follow owing to the crashing rocks and boulders, and the Mole bored her secret way through the bowels of the earth until Kenyon judged by his instrument board that he was below the wall which surrounded the grounds of Hangman's Hall.

Operating the switch which controlled the gyro-motor, Kenyon took the Mole upwards, running the motors dead slow as she approached the surface of the ground.

With only a dull whirring to give warning of her presence, the earth crawler broke ground, slowly revolving blades driving her up into the grass and bushes of the long-neglected grounds.

Switching off the motors, Kenyon pulled open the door in the hull and peered out. He saw the dark bulk of the house rearing itself above the trees about a quarter of a mile away. Nothing broke the silence of the night.

"Right! Come on, Bert!" he said softly and a few moments later the two men were creeping stealthily through the bushes towards the steel shed which flanked the house and which had been used to house the Mole.

The great metal doors were still lying on the concrete where Kenyon had flattened them when he had escaped in the Mole the night before, and the vast hangar-like shed was in darkness.

From the house itself there came not a sound, nor was any light to be seen from the shuttered windows.

"Wonder if they've done a bolt?" muttered Bert, as he and Kenyon crept into the shed.

"We'll find out later," replied Kenyon grimly. "At the moment we want those oxygen cylinders!"

The thin beam of his electric torch played for an instant on the gleaming oxygen cylinders lying in their racks against the walls.

Snapping out the beam, Kenyon thrust the torch into his pocket and for the next twenty minutes he and Bert carried the cylinders to the Mole.

"Now we'll have a look inside the house, Bert!" said Kenyon.

"I'm with you, guv'nor," muttered Bert uneasily. "But, gosh, I wish we had a gun!"

"We've got something nearly as good," replied Kenyon. "There's one or two cylinders of Zworge's poison gas left in the shed—the chlor-ether which he used in the Tower. We'll see what one of those will do!"

It would do very little, reflected Bert to himself, for if Zworge and his gang were inside the house they would use their guns before the gas could take effect on them.

But Bert had an almost blind faith and trust in Kenyon, so he crept back with him to the shed, prepared to see this perilous job through to the bitter end.

Again Kenyon's torch snapped on and off, revealing the gas masks hanging on their pegs. Selecting a couple, Kenyon handed one to Bert and thrust the other into his own

pocket.

Then swiftly examining the chlor-ether cylinders until he found a full one, he looped a piece of wire round the nose and tightened the wire around his waist in the form of a belt, from which hung the deadly cylinder.

“What’s the idea, guv’nor?” whispered Bert.

“You’ll see!” muttered Kenyon. “Come on.”

CHAPTER V

THE TRAP

LEADING the way along the path which he had trodden the previous night on his escape from the house, Kenyon arrived at the rear of the premises.

"It's hopeless to try to get in through any of these steel-shuttered windows," he whispered to Bert, "and it's equally hopeless to try the doors. We've got to find a skylight in the roof. Can you manage the climb?"

"Can a duck swim?" responded Bert, with as near an approach to a snort that he dared make.

He waited whilst Kenyon swung himself agilely up on to the low, sloping roof of an outhouse, then followed him up. Bert understood now why Kenyon had slung the gas cylinder from his improvised belt instead of carrying it in his hands.

Gripping a drain pipe which ran down from the eaves high above, Kenyon commenced to clamber up. It was a difficult and laborious job, for the pipe was flush against the wall, and he could not get his hands completely round it.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, he slowly ascended, pausing now to regain his breath and now to peer hopefully at some near-by window. But all the windows were shuttered. The place was like a fort, in spite of its ramshackle appearance.

Below, crouched on the outhouse roof, Bert waited until Kenyon had completed the perilous ascent, for he knew that the pipe would very probably not bear the weight of both of them.

After what seemed ages to Bert a sibilant whisper floated down to him from the darkness above, and then Bert gripped the pipe and commenced to clamber up it with the agility of a monkey.

But before he was half-way up he was wondering how on earth Kenyon had ever managed the climb with the gas cylinder dangling from his waist, and by the time he reached the roof and Kenyon hauled him on to the sloping tiles, Bert was gasping like a stranded fish, and his fingers were lacerated and bleeding.

"'Strewth, gov'nor!" he panted. "I reckon catburglars earn their money."

"Yes, it must be an arduous profession," agreed Kenyon with a smile. "But our climb's not been wasted, Bert. See that skylight?"

He indicated a framed square of glass glinting on the sloping roof in the silvery light of the moon, which was rising from behind the trees.

Waiting until Bert had recovered his breath, the two men clambered cautiously up the tiles until they reached the skylight.

"Bolted on the inside!" exclaimed Bert disgustedly, after trying in vain to lift the heavy frame. "Just like our blinkin' luck!"

"The hinges are on the top side, so the bolt will be here," said Kenyon, after a swift exploration. "I only hope nobody hears us!"

Wrapping his handkerchief round the bottom of his torch, he struck the glass a sharp

blow. There came a faint crash, then the tinkle of splintering glass somewhere on the floor of the room below.

“We’ve got to move quickly now!” said Kenyon grimly, thrusting his hand through the hole he had made in the glass of the skylight.

His fingers closed on the bolt, and drawing it back, he raised the heavy frame.

Bert dropped down into the room below. Kenyon followed, supporting the heavy skylight with one hand until he was ready to leave go of the sill with the other. As he dropped, the skylight thudded down into place above him. Then, snapping on his electric torch, he whirled the beam around the room.

It was a deserted attic in which they found themselves, and Kenyon gave a grunt of triumph as he found that the door was unlocked.

“You stay here!” he said to Bert, unslinging the gas cylinder and placing it on the floor. “And get your gas mask on!”

With that he glided from the room, felt his way along a narrow landing, and stealthily commenced to descend the uncarpeted stairs. A floorboard creaked beneath his tread. It sounded like a pistol shot in the deathly silence which brooded over this sinister house. Kenyon froze. A door opened somewhere downstairs; he heard a rumble of men’s voices.

Kenyon turned and commenced to retrace his steps to the floor above. He had learned all that he wanted to know. The house was occupied.

Regaining the attic where Bert was waiting for him, Kenyon closed the door. Loosening Bert’s gas mask, he spoke to him in a low, tense voice.

“Now you know what you’ve got to do?” he demanded, when he had concluded.

“Yes, gov’nor!” nodded Bert, tightening up his gas mask.

“Righto, here goes!” exclaimed Kenyon.

Fitting his gas mask over his face, he bent and turned the tap of the gas cylinder, releasing the deadly, hissing chlor-ether.

As the fumes drifted up and around them, Kenyon and Bert seemed suddenly to go mad. They danced, shouted, kicked on the door, and thumped with their feet on the floorboards. But they didn’t open the door. They wanted all that gas kept in the room.

Suddenly Kenyon cannoned into Bert in the darkness, and seizing him by the arm, dragged him back against the wall. In the silence which followed the hubbub they had been kicking up, heavy feet could be heard racing up the stairs.

Through the skylight above a shaft of moonlight was shining down towards the door. In its cold light could be seen the swirling yellow fumes of the deadly gas.

Reaching the landing, the feet came racing along it. By the noise and the excited voices Kenyon judged that four men at least were coming to see what was happening in that attic.

Next instant the door crashed violently open. A man rushed into the room followed by three others.

They reeled as the gas caught them, and the gun in the hand of the foremost man crashed.

But the bullet went wide, for the man’s arms were upflung. The gun fell from his nerveless hand, and he crumpled to the floor in a limp and inert heap.

Another gun roared, livid flame stabbing from the muzzle and the bullet ploughing into the floorboards as its owner crashed face foremost to the floor. The third man was down, and the fourth reeled back against the wall, from which he slithered, limp and unconscious, to the floor.

Weird and awesome was the scene with those four men lying sprawled there in the moonlight as Kenyon and Bert bounded forward to retrieve the fallen weapons.

“Gosh, what a haul!” muttered Kenyon jubilantly, then froze into rigid immobility, for a lighter step was bounding swiftly up the stairs.

The lights in the upper part of the house had been switched on and, waiting until the newcomer had gained the landing, Kenyon stepped out of the room to confront him.

It was Zworge!

He halted within five paces of Kenyon, a gun in his hand, his blazing green eyes glaring at the masked figure which had him covered with a couple of guns.

“Up with your hands, you dog!” rasped Kenyon from behind his mask.

But the words were lost in the roar of guns as vicious, crimson flame stabbed from the barrel of Zworge’s heavy automatic.

The master-crook was the split-fraction of a second too late. Even as his gun spat flame and lead it had been torn from his hand by a bullet from one of Kenyon’s guns.

With an animal-like snarl, Zworge turned to flee. One bound took him to the head of the stairs, and he went down them three at a time.

But Kenyon was after him. He could have shot the master-crook through the back and ended once and for all the scoundrel’s infamous career, but Kenyon wanted Zworge alive.

Reaching the head of the stairs he took a flying leap after the man, smashed down full on Zworge’s shoulders, and together they crashed down to the landing with Zworge undermost.

The man never stirred as Kenyon scrambled to his feet. He lay a twisted, crumpled heap where he had fallen.

“Lumme, guv’nor!” gasped Bert, bounding down the stairs. “ ‘Ave yer killed him?”

“No, he’s still alive!” rasped Kenyon, tearing off his gas mask and bending over Zworge. “I don’t think there’s any more of ’em in the house. I don’t hear any sounds from below stairs!”

Straightening up he turned to Bert.

“I’ll look after this fellow,” he said. “Run up and tie those men securely, then pull them out of the room. The gas won’t kill them if they don’t get too much of it, and we don’t want to cheat the scaffold!”

Obediently, Bert dashed back up to the attic. While Kenyon, having lashed Zworge’s hands securely behind his back with the master-crook’s own tie, and having bound his ankles with a handkerchief, produced his guns again and descended the stairs.

But it was as he had thought. There was no one in the rooms downstairs. He and Bert had captured every gangster in the house.

When Zworge next opened his eyes he found himself lashed hand and foot to a chair in his own kitchen. There was no sign of his men, but Kenyon and Bert were leaning against the table watching him.

“So you’ve come round, Zworge!” smiled Kenyon.

“How did you get in?” rasped the master-crook.

“By means of the skylight,” explained Kenyon pleasantly. “Reflect, my dear Zworge, what queer tricks Fate can play us. Last night I was sitting where you are, bound as you are. You were standing here. To-night the positions are reversed. You intended to torture me, Zworge!”

“And what do you intend to do with me?” snarled Zworge.

“Hand you over to the police,” replied Kenyon. “But first you are going to tell me where you have hidden all the loot you have stolen, and then you are going to write a full confession of the manner in which you faked the evidence which was given against me at my trial!”

“And if I refuse?” snarled Zworge.

“Then you will die!” rasped Kenyon, and now his voice was harsh. “You showed your victims no mercy, and you showed me no mercy. Therefore I shall show you no mercy!”

“Why do you want to know where the loot is, curse you?” grated Zworge.

“In order to return it to its owners,” replied Kenyon. “That, plus your confession, will prove my innocence up to the hilt. Are you going to tell me where it is and write that confession?”

“No!” screamed Zworge, beginning to struggle madly in his bonds. “No, curse you—I won’t!”

“Right!” snapped Kenyon. “I’m wasting no time on you. Come on, Bert!”

They seized Zworge and, in spite of his frantic struggles, tore his jacket, waistcoat, and shirt from him, leaving him stripped to the waist.

Then spread-eagling him face-upwards on the table they lashed his wrists and ankles securely to the four legs of the table by lengths of rope.

Lying there, Zworge ceased to struggle. His blazing green eyes were now following Kenyon’s every movement.

He saw Kenyon tie a wicked-looking stiletto to the end of a long length of string, pass the string over a hook in the ceiling directly above the table, and tie the other end to a stump of candle stuck in a heavy brass candlestick standing on a near-by dresser.

As Kenyon lighted the candle a look of deathly fear crept into the eyes of the master-crook. For the hanging stiletto was poised directly above his heart.

“You get the idea?” said Kenyon grimly. “In ten minutes the candle will have burned down to where the string is tied round it. The string will slip, and the stiletto will drop and pierce you to the heart. The stiletto is razor-sharp. We found it on one of your men!”

“You devil!” croaked Zworge, struggling frantically again, his face contorted with fear and fury.

“So you have ten minutes in which to reconsider your decision,” went on Kenyon unheedingly. “You will either tell me where the loot is and write a confession, or you will die. The choice is yours. There is no one here to aid you. Your gangsters are securely tied and will be unconscious for another hour yet!”

Zworge glared at him with hate-filled eyes. He was a reader of men, and he knew Kenyon was not bluffing. He must either submit to Kenyon’s demands or die.

But if he did submit he would still die on the scaffold. Fascinatedly his glare riveted itself on the burning stump of candle. A cold sweat broke out on his brow.

At any instant now the string must slip!

Zworge's nerve broke. The thought of the searing agony which would come when the knife dropped and pierced him to the heart was more than he could stand.

"I give in!" he screamed, struggling frenziedly in his bonds. "I'll tell you what you want to know!"

"And write the confession?" demanded Kenyon sternly.

"Yes, that as well!" shrieked Zworge. "For pity's sake move that knife!"

But Kenyon made no move. He wanted the truth and he knew he would only get it under the threat of the hanging knife which must drop at any instant now.

"Where is the gold you stole from the banks?" he demanded grimly.

"Some of it's in the Security Company's vaults in Chancery Lane, London," babbled Zworge, the words tumbling over each other as they poured from his trembling lips. "I put it there in the name of Childers. It's in sealed boxes. I said it was my family plate!"

"And the rest of it?" demanded Kenyon, his eyes on the string which was already beginning to slip off the burning stump of candle.

"In vaults in Manchester and Newcastle!" screamed Zworge. "*The string—look!*"

The string slipped and the deadly stiletto streaked down towards his heart. Simultaneously there came the roar of a gun, and struck in mid-air by a bullet, the knife clattered across the table and fell to the floor.

"Lumme!" muttered Bert uneasily. "That was a near thing!"

"Yes," agreed Kenyon, the still smoking gun in his hand. "You nearly delayed too long, Zworge!"

Zworge made no reply. The nearness of his escape had brought him to the verge of fainting.

"Where are these vaults in Manchester and Newcastle?" urged Kenyon.

"The Safe Depository's vaults in Peter Street, Manchester," moaned Zworge, "and the Northern Trust Company's vaults in Grainger Street, Newcastle. The name I use in Manchester was Norton and the name I used in Newcastle was Foster!"

"Righto, that's all I want to know!" said Kenyon briskly, advancing to the table. "And now you'll write that confession——"

Abruptly he broke off as a sudden thunderous knocking on the front door reverberated through the house. Kenyon slipped from the kitchen and moved swiftly along the darkened hallway to the front door.

"Who's there?" he called.

"Open this door in the name of the law!" shouted the voice of Inspector Carter. "You can't escape. I have the house surrounded by armed police and soldiers!"

Kenyon made no reply. Turning on his heel, he sped back to the kitchen.

"Well, it looks as though we're all going to be taken together, Zworge," he said. "That's the police out there and they have the house surrounded!"

Hate blazed in Zworge's green eyes.

“I’ll swear on oath you’re my confederate!” he snarled.

“I don’t doubt it!” said Kenyon, as the thunderous knocking recommenced on the front door. “Thank goodness that door is made of steel and all the windows are shuttered with steel. Bert, we’ll have a try to shoot our way out!”

“And what about me?” grated Zworge.

“We shall leave you here to be captured,” replied Kenyon. “The police are bound to get in sooner or later, even if they have to blow the door down with explosives!”

Zworge glared at him.

“Listen!” he rasped. “I’ll make a bargain with you. Promise to let me go free and I’ll show you a secret way out of this place.”

Kenyon’s mind worked like lightning. If he refused this offer he, Bert and Zworge would be captured, for Kenyon knew that his suggested attempt to shoot his way out must end in failure.

And if he was captured he would go to prison for twenty years—maybe go to the scaffold even—for Zworge would certainly swear on oath that Kenyon was his confederate.

“All right, I agree!” said Kenyon, his words scarce audible above the thunder of a battering-ram with which the police were trying to break in the door. “Get us out of here and you go free. But I warn you, I’ll come after you again. I’ll get that confession from you, proving my innocence, if it takes me a lifetime.”

“That suits me!” snarled Zworge. “Next time you come after me you’ll find me ready. Cut these ropes, curse you!”

A moment or two later his bonds fell loose, and sitting up he swung his legs stiffly to the floor. Then donning his shirt, waistcoat and jacket, he moved quickly to a steel cupboard and, unlocking it, revealed a veritable arsenal of powerful automatics and gas guns.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” rapped Kenyon, reaching him with one bound and whirling him away from the cupboard. “I’m not going to risk being shot in the back by you. You go out of here unarmed.”

Zworge’s eyes flamed their hate, and with an animal-like snarl he sprang at Kenyon. A savage smash to the mouth from Kenyon’s clenched fist sent him reeling back against the table.

“Don’t try any of that stuff!” warned Kenyon harshly; then to Bert: “Grab one of those gas guns. They’re as effective as automatics at close quarters!”

He took a gas gun himself, and with it in one hand and an automatic in the other, he turned to Zworge.

“Now lead the way!” he ordered.

“What about my men upstairs?” asked Zworge thickly.

“We’re leaving them there,” began Kenyon. “The police’ll collect them——”

A sudden terrific explosion cut short his words, the room vibrating to the tremendous concussion.

“By gad, we’re too late!” he gasped. “The police have blown in the door!”

The shock caused Kenyon to stand still for a moment—but only for a moment. He whirled round on Zworge.

“Where is that secret passage of yours?” he yelled at the gang-leader. “Come on—lead the way and we’ll make a dash for it.”

His face contorted with fear and fury, Zworge leapt across the room. Seizing the handle of a switchboard against the wall he whipped it down.

“That’ll stop them!” he panted.

“What is it?” rasped Kenyon.

Zworge wheeled on him.

“Whole house is now electrified!” he snarled. “Doors, walls, windows and the flooring in the hall. Any man trying to enter is doomed!”

He spoke the truth. The police and soldiers had drawn back to a safe distance when they fired the charge which had blown in the door, but now they were rushing forward to enter the house, drawn guns in their hands.

Inspector Carter was in the forefront, but a long-legged lieutenant in charge of the military outstripped him and reached the smashed doorway first.

As the lieutenant crossed the threshold he flung up his arms and crumbled to the floor, his face and body blackened and burned, his clothing smouldering on him.

“Back!” screamed the inspector, halting with outflung arms to stem the rush of men.

But his words went unheeded in the hubbub, and police and soldiers rushed on to their doom. Men fell as though mown down by some dreadful, invisible force. They neither shouted nor cried out, being instantly electrocuted. But now the first mad rush had halted, and the other men drew back in horror.

“The whole place is electrified!” cried Inspector Carter. “Keep back, men—keep back! We cannot enter until the current is either switched off or we get rubber suits, boots, and gloves!”

Meanwhile Zworge had pressed a button in the kitchen, and a panel had slid back in the wall, disclosing a sloping passage lighted by electric bulbs.

He entered, followed by Kenyon and Bert, and the panel slid back into place behind them. He led the way along the passage which suddenly widened into a fair-sized room fitted with bunks, chairs, and a table.

Against the circular walls were gun racks, gas cylinders, and pegs from which hung a dozen or more gas masks.

“A good hide-out,” commented Kenyon grimly. “Everything ready to withstand an attack!”

Zworge made no answer, but led the way across this underground room and along the tunnel which commenced to slope upwards.

“We have reached the exit,” he said, coming to a sudden halt. “It is hidden by a boulder in the middle of a clump of bushes!”

He passed a switch, snapping out the lights in the tunnel. Another switch operated the boulder, which swung noiselessly aside. Kenyon and Bert found themselves staring up at the starry sky far above.

In the intense stillness they could hear shouts and cries coming from the direction of the house but nothing stirred close at hand.

“You first!” said Kenyon, and Zworge swung himself up out of the tunnel followed by Kenyon and Bert.

With bated breath the three men crouched in the bushes, listening with straining ears.

“Where exactly is this spot!” whispered Kenyon.

“One hundred and fifty yards due west of the house,” muttered Zworge.

“Well, the coast seems clear enough here,” replied Kenyon. “This is where we part, Zworge.”

Zworge gripped him by the arm, thrusting his livid face close to Kenyon’s.

“Listen, Kenyon,” he whispered eagerly. “Let bygones be bygones and join me. You’re already ruined and disgraced. You will never succeed in establishing your innocence. I can make your fortune for you——”

“I’m not a crook, Zworge!” broke in Kenyon grimly. “Au revoir, until we meet again!”

With that he and Bert glided silently from the cover of the bushes, followed by a sibilant curse from Zworge.

“A pity we can’t ’and ’im over to the cops, guv’nor!” muttered Bert.

“We can’t, by the terms of our truce,” replied Kenyon. “Keep that gas gun ready, Bert. The Mole lies over in this direction somewhere.”

Foot by foot, yard by yard, they crept forward. From the house could be heard excited shouts and orders being given in hoarse voices.

Then suddenly the black bulk of the earth crawler loomed ahead of them. Tense and rigid, Kenyon and Bert crouched in cover, taking careful stock of the position.

That a guard had been mounted over the Mole was very evident, for there came to them a low mutter of voices and the moonlight glinted on the gleaming steel of fixed bayonets.

“I can make out four men there,” breathed Kenyon, his lips to Bert’s ear. “There may be more inside the hull, but we’ve got to risk that. Use the gas gun only. Come on!”

Moving stealthily from cover they glided forward as silently as shadows, their fingers crooked around the triggers of their guns.

When within a dozen paces of the four soldiers, Bert stepped on a twig. It snapped with a crack which sounded like a rifle shot in the stillness. Instantly the four soldiers wheeled, their rifles at the ready.

“Who’s there?” rasped one of the guards harshly.

Kenyon hurled himself forward as though released from a spring. There was a startled shout, a rifle crashed, then came the dull explosion of the gas gun as Kenyon discharged its deadly contents full into the faces of the four soldiers.

The men reeled back, choking in the swirling fumes. Kenyon leapt aside, his arm wet and bleeding from the rifle bullet, as one of the soldiers made a despairing lunge at him with his bayonet.

Then the rifle fell from the man’s nerveless hands, and all four guards crumpled to the

ground, unconscious.

Two other men had appeared from inside the hull, but Bert was on them before they knew what was happening, his gas gun exploding within inches of their faces.

They went down as though pole-axed, and with a yell of triumph Bert leapt inside the hull.

Attracted by the rifle shot and the general hubbub, police and soldiers were racing madly towards the Mole from the direction of the house. As Kenyon sprang towards the hull there came a ragged fusilade of gun fire, and bullets whined past him.

Next instant he was inside the Mole, and as the door slid shut Bert pressed the lighting switch, flooding the interior with brilliant illumination.

“Diddled ’em!” exclaimed Bert joyously.

His jubilation gave way to sudden apprehension as he looked at Kenyon’s face, which was grim and set.

“Why, what’s wrong, guv’nor?” he exclaimed sharply. “Crikey! You’re wounded!”

“It’s not that!” rapped Kenyon. “Look there!”

He pointed towards the motor leads.

Bert wheeled to stare in dismay at the loosely-hanging leads.

“Lumme!” he groaned. “They’ve been dismantling her!”

“They’ve been putting her out of action,” said Kenyon, whipping off his jacket and oblivious to his wounded arm. “Come on, we’ve got to get busy. If we’re not out of here within a few minutes we’ll be blown sky-high!”

As he attached the copper leads, connecting them up to the motor with swift and expert fingers, there came a hammering on one of the look-out portholes.

“Open that port the fraction of an inch, Bert, and see what they want!” he rapped.

Obediently Bert opened the port a bare inch.

“What d’yer want?” he demanded truculently.

“We are giving you three minutes in which to come out!” replied the voice of Inspector Carter sternly. “If you have not come out at the end of that time we will blow you up with high-explosive. The charge is being set now!”

“You don’t say?” returned Bert, with a polite jauntiness he was far from feeling. “Well, I hope it keeps fine for yer!”

With that he slammed shut the port and turned a white, strained face to Kenyon.

“Three minutes, guv’nor!” he said. “If we’re not out by then they’re going to blow us up!”

“Get into the control seat and try the motors!” said Kenyon, through tense lips, as his expert fingers fixed and tested lead after lead.

Striding to the seat, Bert slumped into it and flung over the switch. There was no response. The motors were dead.

Outside the Mole the grim-faced Inspector Carter stood watching whilst a charge of high-explosive was placed in position against the curved hull of the earth crawler.

“Right!” he exclaimed, when the firing-wires were being run out. “Get back, everybody. They’ve another fifty seconds!”

The police and soldiers surged hastily backwards, for the powerful hydromite which was being used would blow the massive earth crawler to pieces.

“Ten seconds!” rapped the inspector. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, sir!” replied a sapper, his finger on the firing push.

Inside the Mole, Kenyon tested a final lead, and turned again to Bert.

“Try her now!” he said hoarsely.

Bert whipped the switch over. The motors were still dead. Death looked out of Kenyon’s haggard eyes as he turned again to survey the leads.

With a choking cry he pounced on one, thrust it against a terminal, and holding it there, cried:

“Try her again!”

This time the motors purred into life, as Bert flung the switch over.

“*Turn her, man!*” shouted Kenyon, who dared not let go of the lead.

Obediently Bert whipped the gyro-motor lever across, and the control wheel spun beneath his hands.

Outside, Inspector Carter had seen the blades begin to revolve, accelerating with an amazing swiftness until they were whirling madly round.

“She’s moving!” he screamed. “*Fire!*”

The sapper’s finger pressed hard on the firing push. Simultaneously there came a deafening roar, and the night was rent by a fountain of flame.

The massive black bulk of the earth crawler reeled, throwing Bert violently from the control seat and flinging Kenyon against the splashing batteries as she almost overturned.

For an instant, she hung poised on her side, her whirling blades throwing up great showers of earth, turf and debris of bushes. Then, with a dull, vibrating thump she righted herself again and smashed onwards through the trees.

“We were too late!” almost wept Inspector Carter. “She pulled clear of the charge and missed the full force of the explosion!”

“Can’t we stop her somehow, sir?” asked a grizzle-haired sergeant hoarsely.

“No, it’s impossible!” groaned the inspector. “She’ll go under the ground in a moment!”

But the Mole did not go under ground. Instead, she smashed her way blindly through the trees, burst through the wall which surrounded the grounds, crossed the road, and drove on across the moonlit field beyond.

She could not go under, for the acid which had spilled from her batteries had flowed across the steel floor and was giving off thick and suffocating fumes as it burned the steel plates.

The interior of the hull was filled with the deathly, poisonous fumes. Choking and gasping, Bert stumbled to the switch which controlled all the ports.

As they slid open the cool clean air of night swirled into the hull, just as fast as it dispelled the fumes, more of the deadly gas arose from the acid swishing about the floor.

“We’ll ’ave to stop ’er and get out!” gasped Bert. “We can’t go on, guv’nor!”

“Open the door—but keep her going!” croaked Kenyon, who had succeeded in

fastening the lead to the terminal.

His eyes streaming, his lungs feeling as though they were being seared by molten metal, he lurched to the control seat and slumped down in to it.

Bert had got the door open and was standing there drawing in great gulps of the sweet night air.

“They’re following us, guv’nor!” he informed Kenyon, peering back at the mob of police and soldiers who were running in grim pursuit of the Mole. “I reckon they’ve guessed something’s wrong!”

CHAPTER VI

SUSPICION

KENYON made no reply. It was heart-breaking to think that after all they had gone through, he and Bert should be run to earth through this trick of Fate.

He could easily outdistance his pursuers, he knew, but as soon as Inspector Carter reached a telephone, fast police cars, armoured cars, and private cars would be out looking for the Mole.

Unless he could get rid of that deadly pool of acid slopping about the floor, Kenyon knew that he would be forced to abandon the Mole—and that would mean the end of everything for him and Bert.

For only with the aid of the Mole could Kenyon hope to avoid arrest until he had proved his innocence of the charges which had been brought against him.

The night air, swirling in through the open ports and doorways, was holding its own now with the suffocating fumes which were rising from the acid-burning steel, but Kenyon knew that the acid was eating its way through the floor-plates and weakening them dangerously.

Yet what could he do? There was no way at all of getting rid of that acid, except by stopping the Mole and getting to work with swabs and buckets of water.

Water!

Even as the word flashed into Kenyon's mind, he saw through the open look-out windows in front of him the shimmer of moonlight on a stream ahead.

With an exultant croak he gave the Mole every ounce of power, and drove her towards the stream. There came a startled shout from Bert, as the earth crawler splashed down into the shallow bed of the stream, and next instant water was pouring into the hull, killing the acid and putting an end to its deadly attack on the steel flooring.

The Mole heaved itself up the opposite bank and the bulk of the water poured out through the open doorway. Then, handing the controls over to Bert, Kenyon staggered to the nearest port and gratefully filled his tortured lungs with the cool night air.

A few minutes later, under the pull of her gyro-motor and with ports and steel door shut, the Mole burrowed her way deep down into the bowels of the earth.

When she next emerged she was miles away, breaking surface on the desolate and lonely flats of Romney Marsh, where she lay hidden amidst the high reeds. The hour was shortly after dawn and, weary and heavy-eyed, Kenyon pulled back a port and looked out.

"We're somewhere in the neighbourhood of Tollington village, Bert," he said, "and we've got to eat. You'll have to go foraging and see what you can get. I daren't show my face anywhere in case I'm recognised. My photograph has been in every confounded newspaper in the country for weeks now!"

"You leave it to me, guv'nor!" exclaimed Bert cheerily.

A few moments later he quitted the earth crawler and, making his way carefully through the rushes, came at length to the narrow road which led towards Tollington

village.

There were few astir at that early hour, and it was not until Bert was nearing the village that he encountered anyone—an old and grey-whiskered labourer.

“ ’Morning, dad!” he said cheerily. “What time do the shops open here?”

“Not till eight o’clock,” wheezed the ancient. “But the paper-shop opens at seven!” He peered more closely at Bert. “You ain’t on the road?” he said accusingly. “Ain’t a tramp I mean?”

“No, I’m a lorry driver!” explained Bert quickly. “Broke down the other side of Udimore!”

With a nod he passed on, leaving the ancient staring after him. Was the old ass suspicious of him? It would be a thundering good job, reflected Bert, when he’d got that grub and got safely back to the earth crawler.

The paper-shop was just opening when he strode along the deserted village street. He bought a paper and a packet of cigarettes from the shirt-sleeved newsagent.

“That Zworge and Kenyon gang have been at it again,” said the man excitedly, as Bert unfolded his paper. “Six policemen and seven soldiers killed last night in a raid on the villain’s headquarters!”

“Did they catch them?” asked Bert as casually as he could, then stared at the flaring headlines which leapt to meet his eye:

ZWORGE’S HEADQUARTERS DISCOVERED
HEAVY DEATH ROLL IN RAID ON
GANGSTER’S STRONGHOLD.

“No, they ’aven’t got them!” snorted the newsagent. “But I’m keeping my eyes open, that’s what I’m doing!”

“Eh?” exclaimed Bert, startled.

The newsagent leaned confidentially across the counter towards him.

“I’m an intelligent man, I am,” he announced cautiously, “and I asks meself this question: where can this ’ere earth crawler go where it won’t be found? Somewhere lonely, of course. Somewhere where folks don’t go much. And what’s more lonely than the marsh around here?”

“Dunno, I’m sure!” mumbled Bert, staring at him aghast.

“No, ’course you don’t know!” retorted the other triumphantly. “One of the loneliest places in the south of England, the marsh is. Watch the marsh, sez I.” The newsagent was now looking at Bert closely. “You’re a stranger around these parts, ain’t you? I haven’t seen you afore!”

“I was taking a lorry from Ashford to Winchelsea,” said Bert. “Broke down the other side of Udimore. I’m waiting for the post office opening so’s I can ’phone!”

Feeling mighty uncomfortable and scared, he lounged out of the shop and strolled along the straggling village street. He didn’t need to look round to know that the newsagent had come to the door of his shop and was staring after him.

“I wish to goodness I was out of this,” he muttered to himself. “I’ve never met such a

lot of blinkin' nosey-parkers!"

He still had the best part of an hour to wait before the little general store would open, and passing through the village, he seated himself behind a hedge and passed the time reading the details of the affair at Hangman's Hall.

He learned that by means of rubber suits the police had eventually entered the house and captured the four trussed gangsters after switching off the current.

But there was no doubt about the hue and cry which was now being raised for Zworge, Kenyon, and the rest of the gang. The whole country was looking for them, and on top of the police reward of one thousand pounds to anyone giving information which would lead to the capture of the gang, the enterprising newspaper Bert was reading offered five thousand pounds.

"The fools!" muttered Bert savagely. "If only they knew the truth about me and the guv'nor!"

Folding the paper he thrust it into his pocket. Then, judging that the provision shop would now be open, he rose and retraced his steps to the village.

The store was open, and Bert's order made the little old lady behind the counter blink in astonishment. He bought loaves, milk, tins of salmon, and bully beef, pickles, cheese, and butter.

"Me and a few mates are camping!" he informed her, stuffing the goods into a sack which she provided. "Good morning, ma'am!"

He quitted the shop, the sack on his back. As he did so he gave a grunt of dismay. For, standing in earnest conversation with the nosey-parker newsagent was a fat and corpulent policeman.

Seeing Bert emerge from the shop, the policeman stalked towards him.

"Just a minute!" said the arm of the law curtly. "I want a word with you!"

"Well, wot is it?" demanded Bert.

"Where're you from?" demanded the policeman.

"I was driving a lorry from Ashford to Winchelsea," began Bert, "and I broke down the other side of Udimore——"

"I don't want any lies!" cut in the policeman sharply. "Mr. Griffiths, the newsagent, said you'd told him that. I've rung through to Udimore, and there's no lorry broken down there. What's in that sack?"

"Food!" said Bert. "And paid for!"

"Let's have a look!"

Taking the sack from his shoulder, Bert opened it. The constable stared with bulging eyes at the loaves, the bottles of milk, the tins of bully beef and salmon and the rest of the food supplies which Bert had purchased.

"Ho! And who's all this lot for?" he demanded suspiciously.

"For me and my mate!" replied Bert promptly.

"Going to have a proper picnic, aren't you?" retorted the policeman unbelievably. "I've a good mind to take you along to the station!"

"On wot charge?" demanded Bert, flaring up. "You've nothing against me, mister, and

don't you think it. And I 'aven't got all day to stand about here talking to you, so I'll be on my way!"

"I'm coming with you," said the policeman grimly, as Bert shouldered his sack. "I want to see this lorry of yours!"

Bert groaned inwardly, wondering how he could get rid of this suspicious constable before returning to where Kenyon waited with the Black Mole.

"Have you seen the newspaper this morning?" demanded the policeman suddenly, as they walked down the road.

"Yes," said Bert, "and wot d'yer think! Captain Nap tips Galloping Gertie for the three o'clock race——"

"I wasn't referring to the racing news," cut in the constable curtly. "I was meaning the news about the Zworge and Kenyon gang!"

"Ah, I did read that!" admitted Bert. "Just glanced at it like. 'Ad 'em cornered you did last night, and then let 'em get clean away. No wonder there's all this talk about sending the police to college!"

"Never you mind about that!" said the constable reddening. "We'll catch them all right. It wouldn't surprise me if they didn't come around this part of the countryside. What are you hanging back for?"

"I'm not 'anging back," retorted Bert. "This blinkin' sack is heavy, that's all!"

But the fact was that Bert and his unwanted companion were approaching the spot where Bert must turn aside through the rushes if he wanted to reach the Mole.

"I know wot I'm going to do," said Bert, dumping the sack down on the road. "I'm going to put some of these 'ere tins and things in my pockets. Sort of distribute the weight, if yer see wot I mean?"

"No," said the unwanted one, eyeing him suspiciously. "I don't see!"

"It's lack of that college training, that's wot it is," sighed Bert, beginning to transfer as many tins as possible to his pockets. "Now, mister, I'm going to ask you something!"

"What is it?" demanded the constable, edging closer.

"Can you run?" demanded Bert. "Becos if you can't you'll never catch me!"

He suddenly darted into the rushes and went scrambling and floundering through them with a desperation born of his perilous plight. With a startled shout the constable bounded in pursuit.

Kenyon, leaning wearily against the outer casing of the Mole, heard that shout and straightened up abruptly. He saw the rushes waving wildly as someone came floundering towards the crawler, and whipped his gun from his pocket. Next instant Bert burst into view.

"The police are after me!" he gasped, and leapt through the open doorway into the Mole.

"Just one?" said Kenyon in relief, following Bert swiftly. "All right, we don't want to hurt the fellow!"

He pressed the switch which controlled the steel door, and as it slid shut the policeman burst into view, halting abruptly at the sight of the Mole.

Panting and blowing, he stood gaping at the earth crawler with bulging eyes. So the Mole was here in Romney Marsh. What was he to do?

It says much for his courage that with fists clenched he strode forward to the earth crawler. Staring in through one of the small portholes he found his face within inches of Kenyon's. He knew it was Kenyon by the police photographs which had been circulated.

"Come on, out of it!" he said grimly. "You're under arrest!"

"Don't be a fool!" said Kenyon wearily. "I want to tell you something, and you will report it to your superior officers. My name is Kenyon, and what I said at my trial was true and still is. I am not a member of the Zworge gang. The four men captured last night at Hangman's Hall were bound and trussed by me and my accomplice. We left them there to be captured by the police. Sooner or later I will turn the whole gang over to the police, including Zworge. That is all. Good morning!"

With that the port slid shut, and there came the whir of motors. Then, watched by the amazed policeman, the Mole commenced to burrow its way down into the soft ground and was swallowed from view.

CHAPTER VII

CHANCERY LANE

“SORRY I had to leave the sack, guv’nor!” said Bert, when the Mole was safely underground and burrowing its way deeper into the bowels of the earth. “I brought what I could carry, though!”

From his pockets he produced the tins of food.

“You’ve done splendidly,” said Kenyon. “Take the controls whilst I have a look at that newspaper of yours!”

With grim, set features he read the newspaper account of the raid on Hangman’s Hall the previous evening. It convinced him more than ever that the whole country was certain he and Zworge were in partnership.

“Right-ho! Stop her, Bert, and we’ll have some grub!” he said, laying down the paper when the Mole had bored her way fifteen hundred feet down into the earth. “Then we’ll both catch up on some sleep!”

The tinned food was like a banquet to them, for they had not eaten for nearly forty-eight hours. They washed it down with the one bottle of milk Bert had been able to save, then stretched themselves wearily out in the curtained sleeping quarters, and drifted off at once into the sleep of utter exhaustion.

How long he had slept Bert didn’t know, but he awakened to find the light switches on over the chart table in the control room. Kenyon was busy there, poring over a chart with sliding scale and dividers.

“I’m just fixing the exact location of the Security Company’s vaults in Chancery Lane, London!” explained the outlaw.

“That’s where Zworge put some of the gold which ’e stole from the banks, ain’t it?” said Bert. “Put it there in the name of Childers and said it was his family plate!”

“That’s right!” nodded Kenyon. “The officials of the Security Company would not be suspicious because the boxes are sealed and it’s no part of their duty to open them.”

He turned again to the chart and the pencilled slip of paper on which he had been jotting down his calculations.

“I’ve got it worked out,” he said. “If we leave here now we should reach the vaults at one o’clock in the morning.”

“Are we going to raid ’em?” demanded Bert eagerly.

Kenyon nodded grimly.

“I’m going to collect all the loot which Zworge has stolen and hand it back to its proper owners,” he said. “We know where it is, Bert. The rest of it is in vaults in Manchester and Newcastle!”

A few minutes later the motors of the earth crawler purred into life and she commenced to bore her way through solid earth and rock at a depth of fifteen hundred feet.

Inside the warm, vibrating hull nothing broke the stillness save the purr of the motors,

the faint hum of the oxygen generating plant and an occasional murmured word between Kenyon and Bert.

Strange indeed was that journey through the bowels of the earth, as the whirling blades drove the Mole on towards London.

Sometimes the mighty underground tank was boring through solid rock, sometimes through black and solid coal deposits, and at other times through deeply buried seams of chalk and clay.

Once she reeled and momentarily lost her way as she drove through a mighty, underground torrent of rushing black water which roared over her on its way to some vast, subterranean lake deep in the bowels of the earth.

Another time Kenyon pulled back the steel shutters of the look-out windows and switched on the powerful headlights to disclose a series of gigantic caves where enormous creatures like nightmarish rats blundered away from the approach of the earth crawler.

“What are they, guv’nor?” gasped Bert.

“Goodness knows!” replied Kenyon. “Giant rodents of some sort. It would be a bad job if we stuck down here, Bert, with those brutes around!”

The caves with their foul and bestial occupants were left behind and the Mole drove steadily on towards London. At fifteen hundred feet she passed under the Thames, and under the pull of her gyro-motor commenced to bore upwards through the clay.

“We’re eight hundred feet below Fleet Street,” said Kenyon, his eyes on the instrument board with its gleaming array of dials, tubes and gauges. “We’re now directly under the buildings on the right-hand side of Chancery Lane, entering from Fleet Street. The basement and vaults of the Security Company lie exactly one hundred and sixty-five yards ahead of us!”

The Mole was moving dead slowly, her whirling blades driving her up towards the vaults. Suddenly her revolving nose, like a giant corkscrew, touched concrete reinforced with chilled steel.

It was the floor of the vaults!

The whirling nose of the Mole was constructed of stahlum, the hardest compound of steel known to man. There came the crash of breaking concrete and the scream of tortured floor-plates as the earth crawler smashed its way up into the vaults, bursting down walls and doors as it heaved itself up to rest on the buckled floor.

Cutting out the motors, Kenyon whipped on his gas mask. Bert had already donned his and was turning the tap of one of the gas cylinders which, during the journey, he had fitted against the ports.

As the gas hissed out of the cylinders the vaults began to fill with a deadly yellow fog, which drifted along the steel corridors and up the spiral iron staircase.

“Right, come on!” rapped Kenyon, pressing the switch which operated the door in the hull. “We haven’t a moment to lose!”

He was right there, for as the Mole had burst through the vault flooring it had set every burglar alarm and firebell ringing raucously throughout the building!

There were two armed night watchmen on duty in the building, and at the first deafening clamour of the alarm bells one of them had leaped to the telephone which

automatically connected with the nearest police station.

Drawing his gun, the other took one look at the alarm switchboard to see where the disturbance had been called, then dashed down towards the vaults.

The heavy steel door at the head of the vault staircase was triply locked and bolted. But the watchman knew his job, and, whipping out his keys, he had the door open with amazing swiftness.

The heavy door swung open under hydraulic pressure and his finger curled round the trigger of his gun, he bounded down the spiral staircase. But the vaults were full of deadly, yellow fog; the poisonous fumes were drifting up towards him, were all around him. He tried to turn, to retreat, but his feet slipped on the iron stairs and he went plunging down, limp and unconscious, to the floor below.

The other watchman was running down towards the vaults. He had spoken to the police station over the telephone and already orders were flashing out by wireless to all flying squad cars in the area to concentrate on the Security Company's building in Chancery Lane.

Reaching the head of the spiral staircase where the heavy door stood open, the watchman recoiled from the poisonous fumes which were swirling through the doorway in deadly, yellow wraiths.

Turning, he sprang back up the main staircase and snatched a gas mask from its peg near the fire-fighting appliances. Adjusting it, and with his gun in his hand, he rushed down to the ground floor again, and plunged down the spiral iron staircase into the poisonous, yellow murk of the vaults.

At the foot of the iron staircase he stumbled over the huddled form of his mate. Whether the latter was dead or not the watchman did not know. Nor had he time to find out. It was his job to protect the millions of pounds worth of valuables lodged in the vaults, and he intended to do so as far as was humanly possible.

He knew that already fast police cars would be speeding towards the building, and that at any moment now the police would be pouring in to his aid.

Crouched, and with revolver at the ready, he moved stealthily forward through the thick and deadly murk. Suddenly he froze. Ahead of him, looming dark and sinister through the yellow fog, was a massive cylindrical monster with a vast, corkscrew-shaped nose.

It was the earth crawler—the infamous Black Mole used by the Zworge and Kenyon gang!

The watchman recognised it at once, and behind the gas mask, his face was white, his mouth parched and dry. But he had his duty to do, and with a heroism worthy of the highest praise he sprang forward.

Then he saw them—two masked and shadowy figures staggering through the murk under the weight of a heavy box. His gun crashed into life, splitting the fog with lurid flame.

There came a hoarse, muffled cry and one of the figures reeled back, the box falling with a dull thud. From the hand of the other flashed crimson flame, and with a groan the watchman staggered as hot, searing lead tore through his shoulder.

He was badly winged, his gun arm crippled, but he was not fatally hit. Turning, he fled, for his mind had worked at lightning speed.

If he remained where he was he would be mercilessly shot down, and before they could be captured the gangsters would have shut themselves up in their earth crawler and escaped. The police were already pouring into the building, but they would be too late.

There was only one thing to be done, and the watchman sped to do it.

The Security Company had two means of protecting their vaults from thieves. One was to flood the vaults with their own poison gas, and the other was to flood them with thousands of gallons of water.

The former safety device was hopeless, of course; but the latter, if put into operation at once, might overwhelm the Mole and its raiding crew before they could get clear.

Marvelling that he was not riddled through the back as he ran, the watchman gained the iron staircase. He scarcely glanced at the limp and huddled form of his mate, thinking he was dead; but actually the gas only rendered its victims unconscious.

At the head of the staircase the watchman blundered into Inspector Carter and a posse of uniformed police.

“What’s the matter?” rasped the inspector. “What’s happening down there?”

“The earth crawler!” gasped the watchman, thrusting him aside. “They’re robbing the vaults. The place is full of gas. I’ll fix them!”

He leapt for the lever which controlled the vents of the vast water-tanks!

It was Bert who had been hit by the bullet from the watchman’s gun, and Kenyon who had fired in reply. Deliberately Kenyon had aimed to disable the man only, and when the latter had fled, Kenyon had made no attempt to follow him.

Instead he had bent swiftly over Bert, who was lying sprawled on the floor, picked him up, and carried him into the Mole. Laying him on the steel flooring of the earth crawler, Kenyon then dashed back to the box of bullion which he and Bert had been carrying at the time of the attack.

He was taking a frightful risk, he knew, for at any moment armed police might pour down into the vault. But this was the last box of the three which contained the bullion that Zworge had deposited in the vaults, and Kenyon wanted it. The other two boxes were already inside the hull.

Exerting all his strength, Kenyon proceeded to drag the last box towards the earth crawler—then suddenly froze, listening with straining ears. Through the earphones of his gas mask came a sullen roar, as though a torrent had been let loose and was pouring into the vaults.

Next instant, Kenyon saw a foaming wall of water sweeping towards him along the corridor. It struck the huddled form of the watchman and carried him like a cork on its crest as it roared on towards the earth crawler.

Kenyon had managed to get the box of bullion as far as the open doorway in the hull, and not even this avalanche of water was going to make him abandon it.

Bending forward over the box, he wrapped his arms round it and heaved with all his strength. In that same instant the rushing wall of water struck him, sweeping him and the box of bullion into the Mole.

Struggling to his feet, Kenyon made a desperate spring for the switch which controlled the door. As his fingers fastened on it, the door slid shut, blocking out the surging torrent.

There were three feet of swirling water inside the hull, but it hadn't reached the motors, and snapping shut the ports, Kenyon sprang to the aid of the feebly struggling Bert.

Hauling him out of the water, he staggered with him to the control seat, dumped him there; and then leapt for the circular steel hatch in the top of the hull.

With frantic fingers he whirled the handle which controlled the fastening nut, and thrusting open the hatch, clambered out on top of the earth crawler.

All around her was surging water, mounting with terrifying swiftness. But somewhere in that swirling flood was the unconscious night-watchman, and Kenyon was grimly determined not to let the man die without an effort to save him.

But for the fact that the water pouring through the hole which the Mole had made as she burst her way into the vaults, the vaults would already have been flooded to the ceilings. As it was, that hole was acting as a drain, but already the mounting water was within eighteen inches of the top of the Mole.

Something dark and shapeless bumped against the hull and was swept away. Kenyon dived, striking out desperately towards where the shapeless thing had vanished.

It was swirling round and round near him in the whirlpool caused by the great hole in the floor beneath. Kenyon grabbed at it, caught an arm, then slid his hands under the armpits of the man he was taking such a frightful risk to save.

He could feel the terrible undercurrent plucking at his legs like mighty hands intent on pulling him down into the depths. Wildly he kicked out, making a superhuman effort to regain the Mole with his unconscious burden.

His wounds had re-opened and his strength was going fast. Already there was a drumming in his ears, and his gas mask was beginning to let in the gas which had been forced densely to the ceiling by the inrush of water.

Summoning all his energies into one last, despairing effort, Kenyon struck out frenziedly for the Mole. Inches only of the black curved hull were visible now above the water, and at any instant the flood would commence pouring down into the hull through the open hatch.

With a gasp of relief, Kenyon felt himself bump against the side of the monster. He grabbed at a rail, hung on to it for a second then clambered to the top of the almost submerged hull, dragging his unconscious burden after him.

As he did so, there came the muffled crash of a revolver, and a bullet whistled past his head. More revolvers opened fire, and, crouched on top of the Mole, the glaring Kenyon saw that masked and uniformed policemen were firing at him from that part of the iron staircase which still remained above water.

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER THE FLOOD—

THE heavy yellow fog which drifted thickly between the swirling water and the ceiling, and the narrow space through which the police were forced to fire, made accurate shooting a matter of extreme difficulty.

To that Kenyon undoubtedly owed his escape. Expecting at any moment that a bullet would tear through him and send him plunging lifelessly into the flood, he frantically hauled the unconscious watchman to the open hatch and dropped him through.

With a choking gasp of utter exhaustion, he followed, seized the handle and tugged at it to close the hatch.

He was not an instant too soon, for before the hatch was securely bedded into place, water came sweeping through; and as Kenyon gave the handle a final twist, he knew that the Mole was completely submerged.

And now what was to be done? He daren't take the Mole down to the bowels of the earth, for the moment she dropped her nose the water in the hull would flood for'ard and submerge the control seat, switches and levers.

Swinging his feet to the slopping floor, the outlaw made his way weakly to where Bert was slumped in the control seat, his head lolling on his chest. He pulled open Bert's jacket, ripped away the blood-drenched shirt, and examined the wound. It was through the right shoulder and perilously close to the lungs, but not fatal.

Crossing to the first-aid cupboard with which the Mole was fitted, Kenyon returned with lint, bandages, and a flask of brandy. The raw spirit trickling between his lips brought Bert round, and as Kenyon busied himself dressing the wound, Bert's eyes flickered open.

"'Allo, guv'nor!" he said weakly, his livid lips twitching in a brave grin. "Got winged, didn't I? Where are we, and wot's 'appened?"

Swiftly Kenyon explained as he finished dressing the wound.

"And how we're going to get out of it, goodness only knows, Bert," he said. "We've got to keep on a fairly even keel until we get rid of this water inside the hull!"

"But can't we go straight ahead until we get out of here, and then open the hull and let the water out?" demanded Bert. "We're pretty well under the surface of the ground here, aren't we?"

"We're not far enough under—that's the trouble," explained Kenyon. "If we go smashing our way through cellars and basements, we'll certainly bring floors down, and there'll be loss of life, or at least serious injuries to innocent people!"

"Well, they must have some way of draining the water out of these vaults," said Bert, "and knowing we're here they won't be long about it. Won't that help us?"

"Only if we can get the door open and shut again before they attack us, and they'll give us no chance of doing that," said Kenyon grimly. "No; we're up against it properly this time, Bert!"

“Then it looks as if we’ll ’ave to risk them cellars and basements,” said Bert weakly. “After all, folks’ll know we’re down here, and they’re most likely all out in the street trying to see wot’s goin’ on!”

“There’s something in that, certainly!” commented Kenyon. “I’ll see what’s happening outside. Perhaps they’re draining the water off now!”

Moving to one of the ports, he opened it the slightest fraction of an inch. No water gushed in, and, realising that the vaults were being drained, he opened the port a little further and peered out.

As he did so the outlaw gave an involuntary gasp, and the blood ran cold in his veins. For the vaults were empty of water, and on the wet flooring was a hastily assembled Naval gun, its muzzle pointing straight at the earth crawler.

There was no gun crew with it. Silent and sinister it squatted there. But with a gasp of horror, Kenyon realised it was loaded—for he could see the gleaming copper wires trailing from the breech up the wet iron staircase.

They were going to fire the gun from up there, and in that confined space the deadly, high-explosive shell would smash the Mole and instantaneously kill all aboard her by the violence of the concussion!

Kenyon leapt for the controls, almost falling as he ploughed his way through the water which flooded the floor of the Mole.

“Wot’s wrong guv’nor?” gasped Bert, at sight of Kenyon’s white and haggard face.

“They’ve got a gun out there—a naval gun!” rasped Kenyon, juggling like a madman with switches and levers. “They’re going to blow us to pieces!”

The caterpillar treads of the earth crawler rumbled into life, and the glistening steel monster commenced to move forward, her whirling nose smashing through the wall of the vault as though through cardboard.

Simultaneously there came a deafening roar, a terrifying crash, then the echoing thunder of falling girders.

“That’s the gun!” said Kenyon grimly. “If that shell had hit us, Bert, it would have smashed us to pieces!”

“Instead of which it gives us time to get rid of this water,” grinned Bert weakly, as Kenyon pressed the switch which controlled the sliding door in the hull of the Mole. “I’d give something to see them coppers’ faces when they find us gone!”

That was a sight he was not fated to see, however, for Kenyon kept the door open only long enough for the water to pour out. Then, as the door slid shut again, the Mole dropped her whirling nose under the pull of her gyro-motor and commenced to bore down and down into the bowels of the earth.

“Where’re we making for, guv’nor?” asked Bert.

“Southwards until we get rid of that fellow in there,” said Kenyon, jerking his thumb in the direction of the sleeping quarters where the unconscious night-watchman lay. “Then north-westwards to Wales. It’s lonely there, up in the hills, and we’ll have to lie quiet for a day or two until that wound of yours heals up a bit. We’ll want the batteries charged as well!”

He cut out the motors, and at eight hundred feet below the bed of the Thames, the

earth crawler came to rest.

“We’re all right here,” he said. “You’re going to turn in now, and I want to have a look at that watchman!”

In spite of Bert’s protests, Kenyon insisted on him resting, and having helped him to a bunk in the sleeping quarters, Kenyon turned his attention to the watchman.

The latter was in a bad way, and it was only after artificial respiration and the application of oxygen that Kenyon could feel a flutter of the man’s pulse.

Then he forced a little brandy between the man’s pallid lips. The raw and fiery spirit sent the blood coursing more quickly through the watchman’s veins, and after a few moments he moaned, and his eyes flickered open.

He stared up dazedly at Kenyon’s grim and haggard face, then as fuller consciousness returned to him, he struggled weakly to raise himself on his elbow.

“Where am I?” he croaked. “What’s happened?” Memory came flooding back to him. “I remember—the gas got me in the vaults. What’s this place? Who are you?”

“My name is Kenyon,” replied the outlaw quietly. “You are aboard the Black Mole.”

The watchman stared at him with widening eyes.

“Aboard the Black Mole!” he repeated hoarsely. “Was it—was it you who robbed the vaults?”

“I wasn’t robbing the vaults,” returned Kenyon. “I merely collected boxes of bullion which had been stolen by the Zworge gang, and which they had deposited in the vaults for safety.”

The watchman digested this information in silence for a moment.

“So you’re robbing each other now, are you?” he said scornfully.

“Not at all,” replied Kenyon. “I collected the bullion in order to restore it to its rightful owners. I am not in partnership with Zworge, and never have been. I am fighting him!”

The watchman laughed weakly, mirthlessly.

“If you wanted to hand this bullion over to the banks from which it was stolen, why didn’t you get in touch with the Security Company and tell ’em that the bullion was in their vaults? That would have been the easiest way!”

“And how do you think I could have got in touch with them?” demanded Kenyon. “I wouldn’t have been believed and I daren’t show my face anywhere, or I’ll be arrested. Another thing, Zworge knows I’m after the bullion, and he would have withdrawn his boxes from your vaults in the name of Childers!”

He paused for a moment, then went on:

“You’ve got to remember that no one except myself and this gang would recognise Zworge if they saw him. To the police and the public Zworge is just a name—a menace. If he had walked into the Security Company’s building yesterday and called himself Childers, would you have known him?”

“No, I wouldn’t!” muttered the watchman.

“No, and nobody else, either,” said Kenyon. “And if he hadn’t been on the run from Hangman’s Hall he would have walked into your building yesterday and withdrawn his bullion boxes. As it is, I’ve got there ahead of him, and the bullion is now in my

possession aboard the earth crawler here!”

The watchman stared at him.

“And what do you intend to do with me?” he demanded.

“When I get clear of London and the suburbs, I’m going to turn you loose,” said Kenyon. “But I want your word of honour that you will make no attempt to interfere with me or the Mole. If you refuse to give me your word, I shall have to tie you up.”

The watchman eyed him narrowly, as though weighing up the chances of launching a successful attack on him. But he still felt ill from the effects of the gas and his immersion in the water, and, apparently realising that he would come off second best if he tried any rough stuff, he grunted:

“All right, go ahead! I’ll keep quiet.”

Seating himself wearily in the control seat, Kenyon started up the motors, and as the blades commenced to revolve, the Mole drove on under the Thames, boring her way southwards through the bowels of the earth.

An hour later she surfaced in a field in the heart of Surrey. Not a sound disturbed the intense stillness of the sleeping countryside as Kenyon pressed the switch which controlled the door in the hull.

“Out you get!” he said, turning to the watchman, who, twenty minutes ago, had emerged from the sleeping compartment and was still staring about him in wonderment at the batteries, motors, gauges, pressure pipes, tubes, and dials.

“Any idea where we are?” inquired the watchman, moving slowly towards the door.

“Yes,” began Kenyon; “you’ll find a village two miles along the road——”

Abruptly he broke off, his clenched fist whipping up as the watchman sprang at him. The blow took the man full on the mouth, sending him reeling back.

“So that’s your game, is it?” rasped Kenyon savagely, leaping after the man and seizing him in a vice-like grip. “Thought you’d wait until we’d surfaced and got the door open before you attacked me. If I was the crook you think I am I’d kill you. But I’m going to teach you a lesson!”

He bundled him back into the Mole, closed the steel door and set the motors in action. Then down dipped the nose of the earth crawler, and she burrowed her way underground.

To the scared watchman it seemed that they went down, and down, but actually Kenyon kept quite close to the surface. He was looking for a “pocket” in the ground, and soon the gleaming searchlight picked out one. The Mole whirred its way into an underground cave, and Kenyon, smiling grimly, brought his amazing tank to a halt. Once again the steel door slid open.

“Out you get!” he snapped, pushing the watchman out through the doorway into the tunnel. “You don’t like us—and we don’t like you! So you can beat it!”

“But—but you’re not going to leave me here in the bowels of the earth!” shrieked the terrified man. “How can I get out?”

Kenyon laughed. He knew they were only a few yards below ground level, and it was his intention merely to scare this man, who had tried to trick him.

“Try walking!”

And the door clanged shut, and the Mole forged ahead, amid a flying shower of soil

and rock as it burrowed its way through the ground.

The watchman, screaming in his terror, rushed after it, following the tunnel which the earth crawler was making. And then overwhelming relief came over him as he saw a patch of light in front. The Mole had surfaced, and he could see the blue sky and green slopes.

Desperately the man scrambled out of the enormous crater which the Mole had made. He stood there, panting, as the earth crawler once again burrowed downwards, finally to disappear from view.

The watchman ran unsteadily across the field. He wanted to get hold of a telephone, and quickly; but it was not until he reached the darkened and sleeping village, two miles along the road, that he saw any signs of one.

A feeble electric light bulb was illuminating the night bell of a petrol station. Pressing the bell, the man kept his finger on it until a muffled but angry voice from the adjoining house shouted:

“All right—all right! I’m coming!”

A few moments later the door opened and a elderly, grey-whiskered man appeared in carpet slippers and with his nightshirt tucked into his trousers.

“What d’ye mean by it—ringing like that?” he shrilled wrathfully. “What d’ye want?”

“I want to use your telephone?” snapped the watchman. “Where is it?”

“Use my telephone?” yelled the grey-whiskered old chap furiously. “Why, I—I never heard of such impudence——”

“Never mind about that!” shouted the watchman. “I want your telephone. I want Scotland Yard as quick as I can get them. Don’t stand gaping like that you fool! The Black Mole’s near here!”

Mention of the dreaded earth crawler was more than sufficient to send the old man running into the house. The watchman followed him, saw the telephone in the hall, and a few moments later, he was in communication with Inspector Carter, of Scotland Yard.

“That you, inspector?” he rasped. “This is Haines, one of the night watchmen of the Security Company. No, I’m not dead. The Mole is down here, in Surrey. They brought me here in her—— What’s that?”

He wheeled on Grey Whiskers.

“What’s the name of this outlandish dump?” he snapped.

“The Linton All-night Petrol Depot,” babbled the old chap excitedly.

“Linton!” rasped the watchman, speaking into the phone again. “I’m at the garage. You’re coming along right away? O.K., I’ll wait for you here!”

In the fast and powerful police car, which was always awaiting in readiness for him, Detective-Inspector Carter of Scotland Yard, was borne swiftly into Surrey, reaching the garage in a remarkably short space of time.

“Show me this field where the earth crawler surfaced,” he said, before Haines, the watchman was half-way through his recital of the events of the night. “We can talk in the car.”

The car roared out towards the field. Haines walked with the inspector to the two great cavities in the ground where the Mole had surfaced, and then burrowed under again.

“Well, these don’t help us much,” said the inspector grimly. “We can’t follow through the tunnels because they’ve caved in. Kenyon let nothing drop which would give us a clue as to where he is heading, did he?”

“No,” replied the watchman. “All he said was that he was fighting Zworge, as I’ve told you.”

The inspector looked at him queerly.

“Do you happen to know how you got inside the Mole?” he asked.

“No, I don’t,” said Haines.

“Well, I’ll tell you,” said the inspector. “The gas had knocked you unconscious, and when your mate flooded the vaults, you were drowning. Kenyon dived for you, fished you out, and bundled you into the Mole, through the top hatch.”

“But what for?” gasped Haines.

“To save your life, apparently,” replied the inspector dryly. “We saw him diving, and thought he was saving one of his gang. It’s turned out to be you. I don’t think Zworge would have gone in after you, Haines!”

CHAPTER IX

THE WARNING

THE morning newspapers were full of the startling raid made by the Black Mole on the Security Company's vaults in Chancery Lane, London.

Throughout the country it was the one topic of conversation, but no one was more furious at the news than a certain Mr. Levine, the owner of Gorse Grange, a lonely house situated in the heart of the Yorkshire moors.

For Mr. Levine was none other than Zworge, and when he read of the raid it didn't take him a couple of seconds to realise what Kenyon had been after.

"He's stolen my bullion!" he raved, storming furiously up and down the breakfast-room of the Grange. "He threatened he would, curse him, and now he's done it! The next thing we'll know is that he's raided the Manchester and Newcastle vaults and got away with the bullion I've stored there. Thundering fury! There was more than two hundred and fifty thousand pounds' worth of gold in those Chancery Lane vaults!"

"You can easily withdraw the bullion from the Manchester and Newcastle vaults," suggested his second-in-command, a tall, thin, sinister-looking fellow named Rafe.

Zworge continued to stride furiously up and down the room, his hands clasping and unclasping behind his back.

"Look what the fellow's done to us!" he blazed. "He's robbed us of the Mole, after we'd constructed it from his plans—turned four of our men over to the police and grabbed two hundred and fifty thousand pounds' worth of our bullion. By thunder, but I'd like to get my hands on him, that's all!"

"Well, what are you going to do?" demanded Rafe. "You can't leave the rest of the bullion in the Manchester and Newcastle vaults for him to help himself to!"

"And I can't go and get it, can I?" snarled Zworge. "How do I know that he hasn't tipped off the police about me? He knows that the bullion's deposited in sealed boxes in the names of Norton and Foster. If I go to draw it out I'll probably find a dozen plainclothes men waiting for me, all armed to the teeth!"

"Yes, that's true!" said Rafe reflectively. "I hadn't thought of that!"

"Well, use your head for once and think of something now!" shouted Zworge. "There must be a way out of this. There must be some way we can baulk this sneaking rat!"

Eyes aflame with sudden triumph, he smacked clenched fist against his palm.

"I've got it!" he blazed. "I know how we can settle him once and for all. If he hasn't tipped off the police about me, d'you think he'll raid the Manchester and Newcastle vaults?"

"I'm certain he will!" asserted Rafe firmly.

"Then I'll tip off the police!" shouted Zworge. "That's what I'll do. Wait a minute!"

Crossing swiftly to a writing bureau, he seated himself and seized pen and paper. Pausing a moment to collect his thoughts, he wrote feverishly then handed the completed missive to Rafe.

“Read that!” he grated.

Obediently Rafe read the hastily scribbled words:

“To Detective-Inspector Carter,

“Scotland Yard.

“This is to warn you that the Black Mole will raid the Safe Depository Company’s vaults in Peter Street, Manchester, and the Northern Trust Company’s vaults in Grainger Street, Newcastle.

“This is a genuine warning from one who knows, and it is the firm opinion of the writer that the first raid will take place at Manchester, as the earth crawler will reach there first on its way from London.

“If you ignore this warning you will bitterly regret it. If you heed it and prepare a trap, the Black Mole will be yours, together with those aboard her.—A FRIEND.”

“Well?” rasped Zworge, as Rafe was silent.

“Do you think Carter will take any notice of an anonymous letter like this?” asked Rafe dubiously.

“Carter will jump at anything which gives him a line on the earth crawler!” replied Zworge harshly. “I’ll lay fifty thousand pounds to a penny that he’ll act on that letter!”

“But how’s it going to help us?” demanded Rafe. “It’ll get Kenyon out of the way, I admit, but it doesn’t get our bullion for us.”

“Have you forgotten, you fool, what we’re building out there in the workshops?” grated Zworge. “Within a week from now the second earth crawler which we had under construction will be completed. By that time the trap at Manchester or Newcastle will have sprung shut on Kenyon, and we’ll raid the vaults at our leisure. And we’ll not only take our own bullion. We’ll take everything of value that there is in those vaults!”

The trap was set!

As Zworge had anticipated, Inspector Carter acted upon his letter. It was not the rule of the inspector to take much notice of anonymous letters, but instinct told him that this mysterious person signing himself “A Friend,” knew something.

He raced up to Manchester, and after a consultation with Colonel Gretton, the chief of police, an elaborate trap was prepared in the vaults in Peter Street.

The inspector then went on to Newcastle, where a similar trap was prepared in the vaults in Grainger Street.

Satisfied that everything had been done that could be done. Inspector Carter returned to Manchester. For it was in Manchester that the Black Mole was expected to strike first.

Five days passed following the receipt of Zworge’s letter, and nothing happened. Police, soldiers, and civilians were combing the country for some sign of the dreaded earth crawler. The police reward of a thousand pounds for information which would lead to the capture of it, and of the Zworge and Kenyon gang, had been doubled.

In addition to that, nearly every newspaper in the country was offering a reward for finding the Mole.

Consequently, throughout the country, men, women, and children were looking

everywhere for the black steel monster which could burrow its way underground, but nowhere was there the slightest sign of it.

“But I’ll keep that trap set,” the inspector told himself grimly, as he sat at dinner at his hotel. “Kenyon and Zworge can’t get away with this much longer!”

In spite of the evidence of the policeman of Romney Marsh, and the evidence of Haines, the Chancery Lane night-watchman, the inspector still firmly believed that Kenyon and Zworge were working in partnership.

His view was that Kenyon was lying, in order to make things easier for himself should he be captured. In this view he was supported by the four gangsters who had been captured in the raid in Hangman’s Hall. Those four preserved a grim silence, except to swear on oath that Kenyon was in league with Zworge.

Finishing his dinner, the inspector went up to his room to have a wash and change before going along to the vaults in Peter Street.

Inserting his key in the door, he turned it and walked into the rooms. As his fingers snapped down the electric light switch, flooding the bedroom with brilliant illumination, the inspector froze.

For the hard, round muzzle of a gun was pressing into his back and a voice said softly and menacingly:

“Put your hands up, or I’ll drill you!”

Inspector Carter wheeled. He found himself looking into the stern, set face of a man wearing a long overcoat with the collar turned up, and a soft felt hat pulled well down over his eyes. But the inspector recognised in a flash those grim, set features and glittering eyes.

“You, Kenyon!” he grated.

“Yes,” said Kenyon, keeping him covered with both guns. “I took the room next to yours and got in here with a skeleton key. I’ve been waiting for an hour.”

“You took a risk, booking a room here!”

“Don’t I know it! But I wore spectacles, and the reception clerk downstairs didn’t suspect me.”

The inspector was tensed like a spring.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“I want to know the nature of the trap you’ve set in the Peter Street vaults!”

The inspector was startled in spite of himself.

“How do you know we’ve set a trap?” he demanded.

Kenyon laughed shortly.

“Didn’t Zworge give you the tip that my next raid would be either on the vaults in Peter Street or on the vaults in Grainger Street, Newcastle?” he demanded. “He’s a fool if he didn’t. It was the obvious thing for him to do if he wanted me captured——”

Abruptly he broke off, leaping swiftly backwards as the inspector sprang at him. In the same split instant of time the gun which he had first thrust into the inspector’s back exploded with a dull plop, discharging a deadly cloud of gas full into the face of the Scotland Yard man.

Inspector Carter reeled, clawing at his collar, then crashed face foremost to the floor, to lie a limp and huddled heap.

When consciousness next returned to Inspector Carter, he found himself lying trussed and gagged on the bed. Sitting in an armchair was Kenyon, coolly going through the papers which he had taken from the inspector's pockets and suitcase.

"So you've come round?" said Kenyon. "I'm sorry I had to use that gun, but it was more silent and infinitely less dangerous than an automatic."

Inspector Carter made no reply. He couldn't, but his eyes glared their impotent fury.

"I've had a most interesting twenty minutes going through these papers," went on Kenyon pleasantly. "They give full details of the trap you've set in the vaults. I congratulate you on the trap. Most deadly and most ingenious!"

The inspector writhed helplessly.

"Unfortunately, however," continued Kenyon, "the trap will not be sprung. I am going to tell you why."

He proceeded to do so, and it was more than an hour later that the telephone-bell rang shrilly in the office of the police chief.

"Yes, hallo?" exclaimed Colonel Gretton, picking up the receiver.

Then his face expressed sudden blank amazement, and his fingers tightened convulsively on the receiver. For over the wire came a crisp voice which said:

"My name is Kenyon. If you spring that trap in the Peter Street vaults, you will kill Inspector Carter of Scotland Yard. He is my prisoner, and will be with me aboard the Mole when I raid the vaults."

"Here, what's that?" gasped the police chief, the blood draining from his face. "Hallo! Hallo! Oh, confound it!"

The line was dead. Kenyon had rung off.

Colonel Gretton, galvanised into action, pressed the bell on his desk.

"Trace that telephone call which has just been put through to me!" he snapped at the uniformed official who answered his ring. "And send Inspector Sanders in to me at once!"

The official withdrew, and, leaping to his feet, Colonel Gretton commenced to pace his office, his hands clasped behind him, his head bent in deep thought.

He halted abruptly as there came a knock at the door, and the grizzle-haired Inspector Sanders walked into the room.

"You sent for me, sir?" said Sanders.

"Yes!" rapped the police chief. "I've just had a call through from Kenyon. I'm having it traced. He says he's got Inspector Carter aboard the earth crawler and dares us to spring our trap!"

Word for word he gave Sanders the message which had come over the wire.

"It might be bluff, sir," said Sanders. "But we daren't risk it. We'll have to withdraw the trap."

"No!" burst out the police chief. "We will not withdraw the trap. Even if it means the death of Inspector Carter, we spring the trap which we have prepared!"

The grizzle-haired Inspector Sanders stared dumbly at his chief.

“Do you not realise,” cried Colonel Gretton, “that things have got to such a pass that we must capture the Mole at any cost! It is a terrible thing to have to decide that a brave man like Inspector Carter shall die. But his death will mean the stamping out of the Kenyon gang once and for all and the saving of who knows how many more innocent people from death at the hands of these ruthless scoundrels!”

He broke off as the door opened and a uniformed officer entered the room.

“We have traced the telephone call which was put through to you, sir,” said the man. “It came from a street box at the corner of Whitworth Street West!”

“Which helps us not at all,” muttered the police chief. “That blackguard Kenyon will be miles away by now. Never mind, we’ll do the best we can. Have a cordon thrown round the whole of the Whitworth Street West area, and order all patrolling police cars to keep a close look-out for the man.”

As the officer withdrew, Colonel Gretton picked up the telephone receiver and asked to be put through to the hotel at which Inspector Carter had been staying.

“A forlorn hope, I’m afraid, Sanders,” he said grimly, “but we’ll find out what we can about the inspector. Hallo! Is that the Royal Edward Hotel? Colonel Gretton speaking. What time did Inspector Carter leave your hotel?”

There was a brief pause as the clerk made inquiries.

“I’m afraid I can give you no information at all, sir,” he said apologetically. “Inspector Carter was last seen leaving the dining-room and ascending the stairs to his room. His room is on the first floor, and he used the staircase instead of the lift. He is not in his room, and there is no sign of him in the hotel.”

“And he wasn’t seen to leave?”

“No, sir.”

“Then listen to me. Have you noticed a man of this description in the hotel anywhere?”

Swiftly the police chief rattled off a detailed description of Kenyon.

“A man somewhat like that, but wearing spectacles, booked a room earlier this evening,” said the clerk hesitatingly.

“What is the number of his room?” rapped the police chief.

“No. 17.”

“And the number of Inspector Carter’s room?”

“No. 18.”

“Ye gods!” ejaculated the police chief. “Listen! I’m sending police officers to your hotel at once. I want that man in No. 17. Tell your hotel detectives to get after him. It’s Kenyon!”

Replacing the receiver, the police chief turned to Sanders.

“They won’t find him, Sanders,” he said grimly. “His telephone message to me proves that he has already left the hotel. But we daren’t leave any avenue unexplored. I wonder how the dickens he managed to get Carter out of the hotel? You get along there at once. I’m going to Peter Street. The Mole is almost certain to raid the vaults to-night.”

A few moments later a fast car was bearing him swiftly through the busy streets to the

vaults of the Safe Depository Company in Peter Street.

“Sir Guy Nayland, the assistant commissioner from Scotland Yard, is here, sir,” said the policeman on duty at the door of the building, as Colonel Gretton hurried in. “He is inspecting the arrangements down in the vaults.”

Colonel Gretton nodded, and passed into the building. It was a good thing, he reflected, that Sir Guy had arrived on the scene now instead of to-morrow, when he had been expected.

An office on the right-hand side of the vestibule had been turned into a dressing-room. Rubber suits, gloves, and gas masks hung from pegs, and hastily donning a set so that no part of his face, hands, or skin was exposed, the police chief quitted the room and made his way along a corridor to the heavy steel doorway which gave access to the iron staircase that led down to the vaults.

The armed policeman on duty at the doorway saluted and pulled back the door for him to descend. As the police chief hurried down the spiral, iron staircase, he became enveloped in a thin, greenish murk which filled the vault.

This murk was a deadly acid gas, and part of the trap which Inspector Carter had prepared. Not only would the gas kill instantly, but it would put the motors of the earth crawler out of action, leaving the helpless monster stranded and unmovable.

Only the specially prepared masks, suits, and gloves could withstand the gas. Ordinary masks were useless against its deadly acid properties.

Apart from the gas, machine-guns were cunningly hidden behind the steel walls of the vaults, ready to open a devastating fire through the sliding gun ports the instant the occupants of the Mole attempted to emerge in order to loot the vaults.

In addition to the gas and the machine-guns, high-explosive mines had been buried in the ground beneath the flooring of the vaults.

Copper firing-wires led from each mine to firing buttons on a table at which sat two military engineers. Over their masks these two engineers were wearing instruments like earphones.

The earphones were highly sensitive terraphones by means of which the approach of the earth crawler could be heard and the direction of approach defined.

As she reached the mines the engineers would press the necessary firing buttons and explode them, killing the occupants by the violence of the concussion.

It had been impossible to place the mines very close together, however, in case they exploded each other and brought the whole building crashing down in ruins. It was for this reason that Inspector Carter had prepared the other two methods of attack—the gas and the machine-guns. Everyone was fairly confident, however, that the earth crawler would never survive the mines.

Approaching Colonel Gretton, the masked and rubber-clad assistant commissioner from Scotland Yard congratulated him on the efficiency of the precautions which were being taken.

“The place is a terrible death trap,” he said. “The Mole can never escape. This will be a great triumph for Inspector Carter. Is he with you?”

“No, he isn’t,” said Colonel Gretton grimly. “He’s aboard the earth crawler!”

“He’s what?” ejaculated Sir Guy Nayland sharply.

Quickly the police chief explained.

“I had to make the decision whether to withdraw the trap or let Carter get killed, either by the mines or the gas,” he said unsteadily. “It was a case of his life or many. The trap remains, and Carter will not have died in vain.”

Through the mica eye-pieces of his mask, Sir Guy Nayland studied him intently.

“It was a terrible decision to have to make,” he said quietly. “I admire you for the courage you have shown. I agree with you. Carter must be sacrificed to rid the world of these villains!”

“I’m glad you agree!” said Colonel Gretton gruffly. “It makes me feel easier in my mind. Poor Carter said you weren’t arriving in Manchester until to-morrow, though.”

“I had to attend a conference at the Yard which broke up earlier than we expected,” began Sir Guy, then ceased abruptly as one of the engineers seated at the table flung up his hand in quick, excited gesture.

“Yes, what is it?” rapped Colonel Gretton.

“The earth crawler is coming, sir,” said the man tensely. “We can hear her in the terraphones!”

Leaping for the table, both Sir Guy and the police chief snatched up spare pairs of phones and clapped them to their ears.

In grim, tense silence they listened for a few moments to a faint whirring which was growing steadily in volume.

“She’s approaching from the direction of Market Street!” grated the police chief, whipping the terraphones from his ears. “Stand by to fire the mines!”

He pressed a button and an alarm bell clamoured raucously through the hushed vaults, bringing the machine-gunners, tense and alert, to their posts behind the steel walls.

The clang of the bell died away, and in the silence which ensued the two engineers and Sir Guy listened with bated breath to the steady approach of the earth crawler.

“Get ready!” said the assistant commissioner softly. “She’s very close now!”

The whirring in the terraphones had by now grown to such thunderous volume that it seemed to Sir Guy and the engineers to be reverberating through the vault itself.

The Mole could only be a few yards away. Colonel Gretton listening without phones, could hear it boring upwards through the earth towards the vaults.

The burning eyes of the police chief were riveted on the fingers of the senior engineer. He knew he could trust the man’s expert knowledge to fire the mines at the right instant.

Suddenly he froze. The engineer’s fingers had pressed three of the firing buttons. Next moment the man raised an amazed face to Colonel Gretton.

“Nothing’s happened!” he said hoarsely. “The mines are dead!”

“What?” shouted the colonel. “By thunder, but someone will pay for this! Has the wiring been checked up to-night?”

“An hour ago, sir,” replied the engineer. “It was in order then!”

Whipping the terraphones from his ears, he leaped to his feet. So did his companion, and Sir Guy swiftly discarded his own terraphones.

There was no need for them now. The earth crawler had reached the vaults. They could hear the terrifying roaring whirr of her revolving blades driving her up towards them; the concrete floor, reinforced with steel, was trembling beneath their feet.

“Back!” screamed Colonel Gretton. “Back for your very lives!”

They leapt back. As they did so the floor quivered violently, there came the thunderous crash of breaking concrete and the metallic shriek of tortured, twisting steel.

Like some huge, fantastic monster of the underworld, the Mole burst her way up into the vaults, her whirling blades sending the deadly gas swirling in eddying wraiths.

Already the gun ports in the vault walls had slid open and every gun was trained on her. Let the door in the hull slide open and her occupants emerge, then whining lead would get them as swiftly and as surely as would the gas.

As she came to rest on the buckled flooring of the vaults, Sir Guy Nayland leapt forward, drawn gun in his hand.

“Open this door in the name of the law!” he shouted, battering on the iron door of the hull with the butt of his gun.

“Come back, you fool!” shouted the colonel. “We can deal with them. Come back!”

He broke off with a gasp of mingled rage and dismay. The door in the hull had slid swiftly open a couple of feet, a pair of gloved hands had shot out, seized Sir Guy, and yanked him into the earth crawler!

Next instant, as the door snapped shut again, a veritable hail of bullets from the machine-guns spattered against the hull, flame from the lurid, belching muzzles stabbing the murk with crimson tongues.

But the gunners were too late. The amazing swiftness of the opening and shutting of the door in the hull had taken them unawares, and in any case they could not have fired then, for their first bursts would certainly have riddled the assistant commissioner from Scotland Yard.

“Oh, the fool—the fool!” almost wept Colonel Gretton. “Come on, we’ve got to get out of here They’ll be opening fire on us in a moment!”

“But won’t the gas have got them, sir?” demanded the senior engineer hoarsely, as he and his companion dashed for the iron staircase at the heels of the police chief.

“Not if their oxygen generating plant is working,” rasped the colonel. “The oxygen will counteract the effects of what little gas got into the hull when they opened the door. My heavens, she’s moving again!”

The heavy caterpillar treads of the Mole had slid out and she was rumbling forward, smashing down walls and doors as though they were made of cardboard.

But the door, and ports in her hull remained tightly closed, and as Colonel Gretton and his companions watched spellbound, the earth crawler dropped her whirling nose under the pull of her gyro-motor.

The caterpillar treads slid back inside her hull and she smashed her way through the reinforced flooring to go burrowing down into the depths of the earth from which she had emerged.

“They’re not coming out!” groaned the police chief. “They’re abandoning the raid! And they’ve got Sir Guy Nayland now as well as Inspector Carter!”

Wearily Colonel Gretton returned to his office to report by telephone to Scotland Yard.

“A bad job, Sanders, a very bad job indeed!” he said to the grizzle-haired inspector. “Goodness only knows what headquarters will say about it. You saw no sign of Kenyon at the hotel, of course?”

“No, sir, not a sign,” began the inspector, then broke off as the telephone rang shrilly.

“Yes—hallo?” said Colonel Gretton, picking up the receiver. “Chief of Police speaking. What?”

He glanced in blank amazement at Inspector Sanders and gestured swiftly towards a duplicate telephone. Seizing the receiver, Sanders clapped it to his ear.

“This is Kenyon speaking,” Sanders heard a crisp voice over the wire. “Inspector Carter was not aboard the earth crawler. I tried to bluff you into withdrawing your trap. I couldn’t. You’re a brave man, Gretton!”

“Never mind about that,” choked the police chief. “Where is Carter?”

“Sitting bound and gagged in the wardrobe of his bedroom,” answered Kenyon. “He’s locked in, and he’s been there all evening, so you’d better get him out.”

“And what about Sir Guy Nayland, you scoundrel?” rasped the colonel furiously.

“Oh, I was Sir Guy Nayland!” drawled Kenyon. “You didn’t recognise me because of the gas mask. You see, I had arranged to be picked up by the earth crawler in the vaults. I thought you would have withdrawn the trap. When you refused to withdraw it I was in an extremely awkward position. I had to get aboard the earth crawler somehow, so I turned up as Sir Guy Nayland.”

“Who told you Sir Guy Nayland was coming to Manchester?” grated the police chief.

“No one,” responded Kenyon pleasantly. “I read it amongst Inspector Carter’s correspondence. You’d better go and release the inspector, and, by the way, it was I who cut the firing-wires of the mines. Good night!”

He rang off, and the line went dead.

CHAPTER X

AT GORSE GRANGE

“YES, he got me with a gas gun!” said Inspector Carter ruefully, as he sat in his bedroom at the hotel, tenderly massaging his wrists and ankles, whilst Colonel Gretton and Sanders listened to his story. “I ought to be thankful it wasn’t a bullet, I suppose.”

He looked steadily at the police chief.

“D’you know,” he went on, “I’m beginning to think there’s something in this yarn of Kenyon’s that he was framed-up by Zworge, and is fighting to establish his innocence.”

“He’s got a dashed funny way of doing it,” returned the colonel grimly. “You’re not serious, surely?”

“Yes, I am,” replied Carter. “When he’d read the details of the trap at the Peter Street vaults he told me he realised it would be impossible for him to raid the vaults and get away with it. He then said it didn’t matter much as I could do the job just as well as he could.”

“What the dickens did he mean by that?” ejaculated the colonel, staring.

“Just this!” explained the inspector. “He said all he was after was the bullion stolen by Zworge. He intended to grab it and return it to its owners. He said some of the bullion had been lodged by Zworge in the Peter Street vaults in the name of Norton, and some of it in the Newcastle vaults in the name of Foster. The rest of it he’d already grabbed the night he raided the Chancery Lane vaults in London.”

“We can soon prove the truth of that story,” snapped the police chief, snatching up the telephone. “If there is anything in the Peter Street vaults in the name of Norton, we’ll have it opened!”

He gave swift, terse orders in the station, then replaced the receiver.

“If this is true about the bullion being lodged in the Peter Street and Newcastle vaults,” he said, “why didn’t Kenyon tell us and let us find it, if he’s so keen on returning it to its owners? That would have been better than raiding the vaults himself.”

“He said he wasn’t enlisting our aid in his fight against Zworge,” replied the inspector grimly. “He said he could fight Zworge himself.”

“Well, he appears to be enlisting our aid now, all right,” snapped Colonel Gretton. “I mean, he’s told us where the bullion is, you say.”

Inspector Carter looked at him queerly.

“He told me where the bullion is,” he corrected. “He said I’d get the credit of finding it, and it would make up, perhaps, for his using a gas gun on me and giving me a deuced uncomfortable five hours in that wardrobe.”

“And you really think there is something in what he says about being convicted on false evidence?” demanded the colonel.

“Yes,” said the inspector doggedly, “I do.”

He broke off as the telephone-bell rang, and he and Sanders watched as Colonel Gretton picked up the receiver.

“You’ve found two boxes in the name of Norton?” they heard the colonel say sharply. “You’ve opened them? What? They’re full of bullion. All right, get through to Newcastle and tell them to open all boxes in the Northern Trust Company’s vaults deposited in the name of Foster.”

Replacing the receiver he turned to Inspector Carter.

“It’s right enough about the bullion,” he said grimly. “It’s been found.”

The morning newspapers were full of the story, but there were two important omissions. One was the attack on Inspector Carter by Kenyon, and the other was Kenyon’s masquerade as Sir Guy Nayland and his escape in that guise.

What the newspapers said was that the Mole had made an unsuccessful raid on the vaults in Peter Street, Manchester, and had narrowly escaped capture.

The newspapers then went on to announce that the bullion stolen by Zworge had been found by the police in the Peter Street vaults and in vaults in Grainger Street, Newcastle.

Zworge, when he read the news at Gorse Grange, his lonely house situated in the heart of the Yorkshire moors, nearly went mad with rage.

“The fools!” he screamed, crumpling the newspaper in fury and hurling it to the floor. “They’ve bungled the job.”

“Who’ve bungled what job?” demanded Rafe, his thin and sinister-looking second-in-command.

“The police have bungled the job of capturing Kenyon!” shouted Zworge, his green eyes blazing with passion. “And after I’d warned them that he’d raid the Peter Street vaults. And that’s not all, either. The police have got our bullion.”

“What?” snarled Rafe, snatching up the paper.

“It’s Kenyon!” raved Zworge, raging up and down the room. “He must have told them where the bullion was. The next thing we’ll know is they’ll begin to believe him when he says I faked the evidence against him!”

He wheeled on Rafe, his face contorted with maniacal fury.

“I know what I’ll do,” he spat. “I’ll fix that hound once and for all. I’ll soon show the police whether he’s innocent or not!”

“But he is innocent!” pointed out Rafe.

“I know he is!” screamed Zworge. “But the police won’t think so when I’m through with him!”

“What are you going to do?” demanded Rafe.

“I’ll tell you what!” snarled Zworge. “We’ve built a second earth crawler, but the police don’t know she exists. Kenyon will be blamed for whatever raids we carry out with our Mole. D’you follow me?”

“Yes, yes—go on!” cried Rafe, his eyes glittering with excitement.

“To-night we rob the bullion-room of London-Continental Airways near Croydon!” grated Zworge. “There’ll be over a hundred thousand pounds’ worth of bullion in the strong-room waiting to be shipped over to the Continent. That’s why we’ve hurried up completion of the earth crawler.”

“Yes, I know,” interposed Rafe. “And Kenyon will get the blame for the robbery, eh?”

“He’ll be blamed for more than the robbery!” snarled Zworge, showing his yellow teeth in a savage grin. “He’ll be blamed for the brutal murders which are going to accompany that robbery. By to-morrow there won’t be a reward for the capture of Kenyon—there’ll be doubled and trebled rewards for the shooting of him dead!”

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The night was fine and calm, and all was quiet on the flying field of London-Continental Airways. Lights glimmered through the windows of several of the offices, and a brilliant stream of light shone from the vestibule of the hotel where intending passengers were staying the night before embarking in the morning.

The hour was 1 a.m., and the next machine due in was the Flying Dutchman at 4.30 a.m.

In the lighted hangars a night shift of mechanics were overhauling the engines and riggings of the big, sleek monsters of the air, and two armed guards paced monotonously to and fro past the doubly locked doors of the strong-room. Inside the strong-room were two guards their rifles between their knees.

“Reckon I shall be glad when it’s morning!” said one of the guards in the strong-room uneasily. “I don’t mind patrolling hangars, but guarding bullion always gets me on the jump. Crooks nowadays will drill you with bullets as soon as look at you!”

“Yes, that’s right!” agreed his companion. “And when you have skunks like Zworge and Kenyon——”

Abruptly he broke off, his head inclined in a listening attitude.

“Hear anything?” he whispered tensely.

His companion listened with bated breath. To the ears of both men came a faint whirring which grew rapidly in volume, and as it drew nearer the ground commenced to tremble.

“It’s the Mole!” gasped one, rushing for the door. “It’s heading this way!”

Whipping open the door, he was confronted by the two guards on duty outside. They also had heard the earth crawler, which was boring up through the ground at terrific speed, and as one of them leaped for the alarm-cord the raucous blare of a siren rent the stillness, rousing mechanics, officials, firemen, and ground staff.

With its blades revolving at a terrific speed, the earth crawler heaved itself up from out of the ground. Ports slid back, and from them poured a deadly machine-gun fire, streams of bullets mowing down the wildly-running mechanics, guards, and officials.

The door in the hull slid back, and, covered by machine-gun fire, half a dozen men, armed to the teeth, dashed into the strong-room.

They were out again in a few moments, lugging with them the heavy bullion boxes. The whole raid had taken place with such amazing swiftness, and was covered by such a murderous hail of bullets from the gun ports, that the men on the aerodrome were powerless.

From the hotel came pouring startled guests and staff, the majority of them wearing only dressing-gowns over their night attire.

Every box of bullion was now aboard the earth crawler. The door in her hull slid shut,

her caterpillar treads slid out, and as she rumbled forward, her machine-guns blazed into life again. Men, women, and children were mercilessly shot down.

Then the guns were stilled, the caterpillar treads slid back into the hull, and the Black Mole burrowed deep down again into the bowels of the earth.

Inside the warm and brilliantly lighted hull Zworge was jubilant.

“We’ll see what the police say now!” he snarled. “They’ll blame Kenyon for certain!”

He broke off, clutching Rafe by the arm, his face livid with sudden terror.

“Listen!” he gasped. “What’s that?”

The strange and terrifying thunder which Zworge had heard down there in the very bowels of the earth, was growing swiftly in volume.

Rafe looked at him, his face white and haggard with fear of the unknown.

“What is it, Zworge?” he gasped.

The rest of the crew of Mole No. 2 were standing tense and rigid, their terror-stricken eyes on Zworge.

“What is it, master?” cried one of the men hoarsely, grabbing Zworge by the arm.

Zworge wrenched his arm free from the other’s grip.

“By fury! I know what it is!” he screamed. “Out of the way, you fool! Let me have the controls!”

Thrusting the man savagely aside, he leapt for the control seat. With trembling hands he whipped the controls first into neutral, then yanked them into reverse. But too late! There was a crash as the nose of Mole No. 2 burst through a wall of steel and then the roar which had been reverberating through the hull of the earth crawler rose to a high-pitched screaming inferno of sound.

And the panic-stricken Zworge knew what it was. After leaving the scene of his murderous raid on the London-Continental Airport, the earth crawler had smashed through a tunnel and blundered across the track of one of London’s mighty underground railways. Tearing towards her now at over thirty miles an hour was a train laden with early morning passengers!

The driver of that train suddenly tensed, a look of horror in his starting eyes. Ahead of him a steel monster had burst through the side of the tunnel and was lying right across the gleaming metals!

With a shriek of despair the driver clapped on all brakes. He might just as well have tried to stem the mighty torrent of Niagara. With a screaming of tortured metal the heavy train roared on to destruction—crashed right into the earth crawler!

In the underground tank the shock of that terrific impact had hurled every man violently against the steel walls of the hull, and almost overturned the crawler.

The stahlum with which she was constructed was the hardest compound of steel known to man, and although it was badly dented under the smashing blow struck by that hurtling battering-ram of a train, it was not fractured.

But more than half the crew were knocked completely out of action, some with broken limbs, others with fractured ribs, and one or two lay in the limp unconsciousness of concussion.

Zworge himself had escaped more lightly than any, for he had foreseen what was coming, and had whipped the safety belt of the control seat firmly about his waist.

As it was he felt his senses swimming through the violence of the impact, and matters were not helped by the fumes which arose from the steel flooring, for as the earth crawler had heeled over, the strong acid of her batteries had spilled and splashed down to the steel plating into which it commenced to eat its way.

But if matters were bad inside the earth crawler, they were a thousand times worse outside in the tunnel where the wrecked and telescoped coaches lay piled one on top of another.

The current had either been switched off or had short-circuited, and the tunnel was in darkness save for the eerie, lurid flames of the burning wreckage amidst which lay the dead and dying. Screams, shrieks, shouts and moans added to the pitiful terror of the scene.

But now the great blades of the earth crawler whirled into sudden life again, and the huge monster of steel crashed her way forward from out the blazing wreckage. Smashing her way through the wall of the tunnel as easily as though it had been made of paper, the earth crawler vanished into the bowels of the earth.

Two hundred and eighty people perished in that dreadful crash, and twenty-nine had been mown down and died of injuries on the flying field of the London-Continental Airport.

So that terrible night raid by Zworge's earth crawler had resulted in the death of three hundred and nine innocent people, and when the news came out in the later editions of the morning newspapers the whole country was more shocked than ever before.

Everybody held Kenyon responsible. There was only one Black Mole, and it now belonged to Kenyon. It was said that he and Zworge had parted, and Kenyon had retained possession of the Mole!

In his office at Scotland Yard, Inspector Carter read the reports of the case grimly.

"I was beginning to have faith in Kenyon," he rasped to one of his subordinates, "but after this I'll never rest until I see him dangling from the scaffold rope!"

Zworge, safely back at Gorse Grange, was delighted as he waded through newspaper after newspaper, and saw that every one of them was blaming Kenyon.

"By thunder!" he cried. "They've increased the reward for his capture to fifty thousand pounds. And the beauty of it is, Rafe, we can carry out raid after raid with our earth crawler and Kenyon will get all the blame!"

"Yes!" grinned Rafe. "We've got him just where we want him!"

He handed a newspaper to Zworge and indicated the flaring headlines.

"Does that suggest anything to you?" he asked.

Zworge looked at the headlines and read:

SPECIAL MEETING OF PARLIAMENT
TO-NIGHT.

MEASURES TO BE TAKEN AGAINST BLACK MOLE

Zworge grinned.

“You mean we ought to turn up there?” he said.

“Yes; why not?” replied Rafe. “If we raid the Houses of Parliament and gas and shoot a few of ’em, they’ll put the whole country under martial law and have special troops and army corps all out looking for Kenyon. They won’t rest till they get him, and our revenge on him will be complete!”

Zworge’s thin, cruel lips twitched in a wolfish grin and his green eyes glittered.

“You’re right, Rafe!” he said softly. “It’s a grand idea. We’ll drop in at the Parliamentary debate to-night and liven it up a bit!”

CHAPTER XI

THE GREATEST CRIME

THE hour was midnight, and in the hushed and packed House of Commons at Westminster the debate was being held on the measures which were to be undertaken to rid Britain and the world of the menace of the Black Mole and Robert Kenyon.

The Home Secretary himself rose amidst tense stillness to address the House. He was a grave-featured and grey-haired man, and his quiet voice carried to every corner of the vast chamber.

“The police have done all they can,” he said. “They will continue to work unremittingly to find the lair of this dreadful monster which threatens our very safety, but it is my view that they should be aided by the largest detachment of troops which can be placed under orders to assist them!”

Member after member rose and seconded that view, then the white-haired and dignified figure of the Prime Minister rose.

“There is no doubt,” he said, amidst a deathly hush, “that this terrible earth crawler and its murderous crew can no longer be fought by ordinary methods. The time has come for us to call in the aid of certain mechanical corps of the British Army. No matter what the cost, the lives and security of British people must be preserved——”

He broke off, standing tense and motionless, his hand gripping the lapels of his jacket.

In the deathly silence which followed, a dull whirring sound, growing swiftly in volume, was audible to everyone in the House.

“Look!” screamed a voice suddenly.

The floor in the centre of the House was quivering violently. The whirring had grown to a loud, menacing roar, then with a sudden splintering crash, a whirling corkscrew-shaped nose of steel burst into view amidst a shower of flying debris. To the accompaniment of shouts of men and screams of women in the galleries, the earth crawler roared its way up from out the bowels of the earth and came to rest on the smashed flooring of the House.

Instantly the motors were stilled, gun ports and gas ports slid back, and there sounded the snarling crackle of blazing guns.

Mercilessly those deadly streams of bullets swept the great chamber, and to add to the horror of the dreadful scene a yellow murk of deadly poison gas drifted slowly away from the earth crawler, growing denser and denser until it filled the whole chamber. Men needed only one whiff of it to collapse in the writhing throes of agonising death, for Zworge was using one of the most deadly lung-attacking gases known to science.

Outside, the terrifying news had spread with frightful rapidity, and armoured cars and armed police cars and fire engines were racing to the Houses of Parliament.

In the chamber itself, the masked face of Zworge was pressed against an open port of Mole No. 2. His eyes, glittering behind the mica of the mask, swept the huddled piles of dead.

No, there was none left alive, it seemed. Many had escaped when the earth crawler had first appeared, of course, but there was none in the chamber to threaten danger.

Zworge pressed the switch which controlled the door in the hull. The door slid back and the masked and rubber-clad figure of Zworge emerged.

In his hand he carried a slip of paper. Crossing to where the huddled body of the Prime Minister lay, he stooped and pinned the paper on the man's jacket. Before straightening up he scanned the scrawled words, a triumphant smile on his thin, cruel lips. They read:

“You cannot destroy me. I will continue to strike until I have reduced Britain to chaos and anarchy.

“Robert Kenyon.”

“That fixes Kenyon, once and for all, I think!” muttered Zworge. Then, straightening up, he turned to retrace his steps to the earth crawler.

As he did so he suddenly froze, for swiftly sighting a rifle on him over the piled dead in the main doorway was the masked figure of a policeman.

With one bound Zworge whipped into action. He leapt for the earth crawler. Simultaneously the rifle cracked viciously, there came a spurt of flame, and throwing up his hands the master-crook pitched face foremost to the floor.

Over the gruesome pile of bodies in the doorway clambered the masked figures of a score of armed policemen. But before they could get half-way to where Zworge was lying sprawled on the warped and twisted floor, the machine-guns of the earth crawler roared into deadly life again from the open gun ports.

Dropping on their faces the policemen returned the fire as best as they could, but their bullets bounced harmlessly off the outer steel casing of Mole No. 2.

The object of the machine-gun fire was to cover the rescue of Zworge, for, shielded by that deadly hail of bullets, a couple of masked and rubber-clad men dashed out of the hull.

Picking up the body of the master-crook, they carried it swiftly into the earth crawler. Then the door slid shut in the hull, the motors purred into life, and under the pull of her gyro-motor the earth crawler dropped her whirling nose and commenced to burrow her way back into the bowels of the earth.

Zworge was not dead. In fact he was not even badly wounded, for the bullets had merely grazed his scalp, leaving a livid weal and knocking him completely out for the time being.

“Another fraction of an inch and it would have got me,” he said to Rafe as the earth crawler burrowed its way northwards, heading for its lonely lair at Gorse Grange in the heart of the Yorkshire moors. “Well, Rafe, I think we've given them something to howl about now!”

“Yes, but we'll have to lie low ourselves until they've caught Kenyon,” said Rafe unsteadily.

“Our earth crawler remains hidden underground, and we lie doggo at Gorse Grange until Kenyon is taken and hanged,” said Zworge. “We've certainly loosened the hounds after him now, Rafe. By thunder, I wouldn't like to be in his shoes for all the gold in the world. I wonder where he is!”

As a matter of fact, Kenyon was hiding in a lonely cave amongst the Cheviot Hills, on the border of England and Scotland.

Following his unsuccessful raid on the vaults in Peter Street, he had retreated to the lonely Cheviots in order to lie up whilst he recharged his electric batteries with the oil engine the Mole carried for that purpose.

The outlaw had not seen a newspaper for a day or two, and on the evening of the day following Zworge's raid on the Houses of Parliament, Kenyon was sitting at the entrance to his cave smoking his pipe. Bert had gone off early that morning to get provisions and newspapers from the nearest village, which was more than twelve miles away.

Not only was Kenyon unaware of the raid on Westminster by Zworge, but he was also in complete ignorance of the master-crook's raid on the London-Continental Airport.

So as he sat there smoking his pipe and watching through the deepening dusk for the return of Bert, his thoughts weren't too unpleasant.

After all, he reflected, he was getting on. He had some of the bullion which Zworge had stolen from the banks, and he had told Inspector Carter where the remainder of it was hidden in Manchester and Newcastle.

All he had to do now was to discover Zworge's secret headquarters, force a complete confession out of the master rogue, and then his innocence would be definitely established.

He would, into the bargain, do his utmost to hand the whole gang over to justice. If he could do that, so much the better.

But on one thing Kenyon was grimly determined. Come what might, he would get Zworge—get him either dead or alive.

The sight of Bert hurrying up the hill caused Kenyon to rise abruptly and knock out his pipe. He himself had not been able to go into the village for either newspapers or provisions, for his photograph was pasted up everywhere and there was a big reward out for his capture or for information which would lead to his capture.

As he advanced through the deepening dusk to meet Bert, something in the latter's attitude caused Kenyon's eyes to narrow. For Bert was crouched and half-running and kept looking continually over his shoulder. Then one look at Bert's white face and blazing eyes told the outlaw that something was radically wrong.

"What's happened, man?" he cried.

"By crikey, we're done!" gasped Bert. "The whole country's been put under martial law—because of us. It's Zworge—he's raided the 'Ouses of Parliament—killed the Prime Minister and 'undreds of others—and we've got the blame! Look at these 'ere papers, gov'nor!"

Kenyon's face was pale as he took the bundle of newspapers from under Bert's arm. On the front page of one was a great inch-high, flaring headline:

CRIME WHICH HAS SHOCKED THE
WORLD.

MOST INFAMOUS MURDERS IN HISTORY
OF CRIME.

KENYON AND GANG TO BE SHOT AT
SIGHT.

“Don’t read it now!” begged Bert, dragging Kenyon towards the cave. “Let’s get away from ’ere, guv’nor. I won’t feel safe until I’m miles and miles under the ground!”

Kenyon paid no heed to him. He had opened another newspaper, and more of the terrible, flaring headlines met his shocked eyes:

MARTIAL LAW DECLARED.

TANKS AND TROOPS IN WAR AGAINST
KENYON.

ONE MILLION POUNDS REWARD FOR
CAPTURE
OF
WORLD’S WORST CRIMINAL.

Slowly Kenyon raised his head and looked at Bert with burning eyes.

“Don’t they suspect Zworge at all?” he grated.

“No, just us,” babbled Bert. “It’s all been done with an earth crawler. Zworge must have built another, and folks thinks it’s ours!”

He broke off as the stillness was broken by the mournful cry of a curlew. Bert grabbed Kenyon by the arm.

“Come on, guv’nor, let’s get away!” he pleaded desperately. “I’ve got a feeling that they’re after us. When I bought that grub in the village the shopkeeper asked me pretty close who it was for. I said me and a pal was camping. Then I’ve kept on ’earing them curlews, but I’m thinking they might be human beings signalling to each other——”

“What’s this about a note left on the body of the Prime Minister?” cut in Kenyon, staring again at the paper.

“It’s a note supposed to be signed by you,” explained Bert. “A forgery, of course. More of Zworge’s work. *Oh, crikey, what’s that?*”

“What’s what?” demanded Kenyon sharply.

“I thought I saw something move behind that boulder there,” said Bert, pointing to where a rounded boulder jutted up from out the heather.

“There’s nothing there,” said Kenyon, staring in the direction indicated. “Go and look if you like!”

Bert moved cautiously forward towards the boulder. As a rule, he was cool enough and didn’t know what nerves were. But he was certain he had been followed across the moors that day, although he had seen nothing except one distant solitary figure far behind him, and that had soon been lost to view.

“It’s the instinct of the ’unted creature,” Bert told himself as he moved towards the boulder. “I read that once in a book, and now I knows wot it means. There’s nothin’

be'ind this 'ere boulder, anyway!"

Then, whether it was the instinct of the hunted creature or not, something made him stoop and peer closely at the heather. It was very faintly crushed, and as Bert felt it with his hand his heart missed a beat.

For the heather was warm! Someone had been lying there watching him and Kenyon!

That someone was a ragged, brown-skinned moorland lad, who was already moving away down the hillside as swiftly and as silently as any moorland hare.

He had wriggled away through the heather until he had known that the dusk would hide him from view, then, rising to his bare feet, he had bounded down the heather-covered slope until he reached the spot where a grim-faced captain of infantry awaited his return.

With the captain were other soldiers, and the lad knew that a deep, khaki-coloured line of them extended right round the hillside.

It was the lad who had trailed the uneasy Bert from the distant moorland village, and far behind him had followed the soldiers, led on by the curlew call.

Brown cloth covered all the metal work of their accoutrements so that no tell-tale glint of sun on metal might give them away as they followed their unseen pilot. And it was to this lonely hill amongst the grim, bleak Cheviots that he had led them.

"Well, lad?" asked the captain.

"They're up there, both of 'em!" replied the boy, his voice quivering with eagerness. "And the earth crawler's there as well. They've got her in a cave—a great, muckle beastie o' steel, she is!"

"Good!" breathed the captain.

So it had worked, this watch which was being kept on all the moors, marshes and lonely districts of Britain. The notorious Kenyon was up there with the Black Mole.

When Bert had entered the village to buy food and newspapers he had been quite aware that, as a stranger in a little, lonely community, he would be stared at.

But what neither Kenyon nor Bert had known was the amazingly organised search which was taking place throughout the country for the earth crawler.

It would have been all the same if Bert or any other stranger had entered some Cumberland village or some lonely Derbyshire village. He would still have been followed.

There were eyes and spies everywhere now, and Bert had been followed by the selected lad, picked for his knowledge of the moors.

Meanwhile a telephone message had been circulated to all troops in the area, and from north, south, east and west they had commenced to close in on the moors, moving slowly and cautiously through the gorse and heather.

There were eight hundred men hidden in the heather around the base of the hill. Suddenly a whispered command ran along the line, bayonets were silently fixed, and, rising to a crouching attitude, the khaki-clad figures commenced to steal softly up the hill, closing in on the cave.

Half-way to the cave another breathed command sent every man down on all fours, and with scarce a rustle the advance continued.

With the captain was the ragged, moorland lad, a light of excitement shining in his

clear eyes. This was a great day for him—probably the greatest he would ever know.

Kenyon, at the entrance of the cave, was still reading the newspapers, peering at them through the dusk, which made reading almost impossible.

But no longer was Kenyon shocked or startled. All he was conscious of was a cold, mounting rage against the man who had wronged him so and committed these brutal and ghastly atrocities in his name.

Bert's voice, hoarse and gasping, cut in suddenly as the outlaw read the printed columns:

“Look!”

Kenyon raised his head. As he did so he froze rigid and immobile. For from out of the heather all around him, and only a few paces away, had risen a ring of khaki-clad soldiers with rifles levelled straight at him and Bert.

Simultaneously a voice rang out harshly:

“Put your hands up, or we will blow you to pieces!”

Waveringly the hands of Bert and Kenyon crept above their heads.



[See page 130](#)

“PUT UP YOUR HANDS OR WE WILL BLOW YOU TO PIECES.”

CHAPTER XII

A FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

THE captain of infantry stepped forward, a drawn revolver in his hand. By his side was the ragged moorland lad who had guided the soldiers.

“You are my prisoners!” began the officer harshly. “At the first sign of resistance you will be shot dead——”

As though catapulted from a spring, Kenyon was on him, one iron-hard fist smashing full to the officer’s jaw.

“Into the Mole, Bert!” yelled Kenyon holding the dazed officer as a shield between himself and the levelled rifles of the soldiers.

The sliding door in the hull of the earth crawler was open. Bert leaped towards it, but found himself attacked by the moorland lad, who fought with the fury of a wild cat.

The whole thing had taken place in one split-fraction of time, and already the soldiers were rushing forward, their bayonets gleaming in the dusk.

They dared not fire at Kenyon for fear of hitting the officer whom Kenyon was holding to him, and they dared not fire at Bert for fear of hitting the lad.

This was no time for niceties, and Bert knew it. He smashed his fist savagely against the side of the lad’s head and hurled himself backwards into the Mole, but his attacker still clung on grimly.

Meanwhile Kenyon, thrusting the officer savagely towards the bayonets of the running soldiers, whirled and leaped for the open door of the earth crawler.

Rifles crashed, bullets whistled past him into the black recesses of the cave, something like white-hot steel seared his side with burning agony, then he was inside the Mole, gasping and panting.

With the desperately fighting moorland lad still clinging to him, Bert had managed to stagger as far as the switch which controlled the door and ports.

As he snapped it down the door and ports slid shut, then the interior of the Mole was flooded with brilliant illumination as Kenyon pressed the lighting switch.

They were safe unless the soldiers used high-explosive with which to blow them up, for none could get into the Mole now.

“Will yer mind pullin’ this ’ere fightin’ fury off me, guv’nor?” gasped Bert, striving frantically to rid himself of the ragged, moorland lad, who was still striking at him with clenched brown fists.

“Steady, lad—steady!” said Kenyon, seizing the boy by the arms. “The question is—what are we going to do with him?”

“Ay, wot?” growled Bert. “We can’t open the door and push ’im out. Looks like as if we’ll ’ave to take ’im with us.”

“Yes, that’s the only thing we can do,” nodded Kenyon.

“You rotters!” shouted the boy defiantly. “You needn’t think I’m frightened. There are soldiers everywhere and they’ll get you sooner or later!”

Seating himself weakly in the control seat, Kenyon pulled over the motor switch. He did it slowly and deliberately so that the blades would begin to revolve slowly at first, giving the soldiers outside warning to stand clear.

The Mole was facing into the cave, and the revolving, conical nose bit into the rock at the rear, boring it like a huge mechanical drill. Then slowly the earth crawler vanished from view, burrowing its way into the heart of the hill, and leaving the helpless soldiers staring after it until it had completely disappeared.

• • • • •

Fifteen hundred feet down in the bowels of the earth the bandaged Kenyon, Bert, and their youthful prisoner sat down to supper in the warm interior of the Mole.

“What’s your name?” Kenyon asked the lad.

“Jock Davey!” came the bold reply. In spite of the fact that he was a prisoner in the hands of an outlaw who was regarded as the world’s most ruthless crook, the boy showed not a sign of fear.

“Well, Jock Davey, just tell us what’s happening up there in the great big world.”

Jock needed no second bidding, and as he explained the plans which had been made for the capture of the earth crawler, Kenyon and Bert exchanged glances of dismay.

“It looks to me as though our capture’s only going to be a matter of days, Bert,” said Kenyon anxiously. “Our batteries are all right, but the oxygen’s running low.”

“And come to the surface anywhere your care to name, and you’ll be caught for certain,” chimed in Jock triumphantly. “There’s soldiers, tanks, guns, and watchers everywhere!”

“Well, there’s only one thing for it, Bert,” said Kenyon. “We’ve got to discover the secret of Zworge’s headquarters without delay, round up the gang, and get that confession of my innocence out of Zworge!”

“Sounds all right!” said Bert grimly. “But where are we goin’ to start? If the police can’t find where Zworge’s hiding, how can we?”

“Easily!” smiled Kenyon. “You remember those four gangsters that we tied up and left for the police to capture when you and I raided Hangman’s Hall?”

“Yes, I remember them,” nodded Bert, watching Kenyon closely, for he knew that the outlaw had some definite plan of action in mind.

“I saw in those newspapers you bought,” went on Kenyon, “that the four men have been sent to Bleakmoor Prison, pending trial. The name of one of them is Crayshaw, and in the evidence which Zworge faked against me at my trial, I was supposed to have dealings with this Crayshaw. Therefore he seems to have been pretty much in Zworge’s confidence. If he hasn’t then it’s going to be rather painful for him.”

“How d’yer mean?” demanded Bert.

“I mean that I’m going to get him out of Bleakmoor, and I’m going to find out from him where Zworge’s secret headquarters are,” explained Kenyon. “The police will have questioned him undoubtedly, but I’m going to use methods of my own. I’ll make him talk somehow!”

“But first we’ve got to get him out of Bleakmoor, eh?” said Bert thoughtfully.

“We’ll get down to discussing that right now,” said Kenyon crossing to the chart table and producing charts, maps and plans.

“Wot, in front of the boy?” demanded Bert. “Wot if he gives our game away when we turn him loose?”

“We’re not turning him loose until we’ve raided the prison,” said Kenyon.

“You needn’t worry about me!” cut in Jock defiantly. “I don’t mind how long I stay down here. I’m learning, and I’m listening, and if I can put a spoke in your wheel I will!”

Kenyon stared at him.

“You’re a good plucked ’un, anyway,” he said admiringly. “I only wish I could convince you that we’re not the rogues you and everybody else thinks us.”

“You’re different to what I thought you’d be, anyway,” admitted Jock. “Have you really had a row with Zworge?”

“There was never any question of having a row with Zworge,” replied Kenyon shortly. “We were never in his gang at all. He tried to get me to sell him the plans of the earth crawler when I invented it, and when I refused he stole the plans, and ruined me by faking evidence to show I’d sold them to him!”

“That’s why you were kicked out of the Tank Corps and sentenced to twenty years penal servitude, wasn’t it?” demanded Jock.

“Yes, that’s why,” nodded Kenyon. “Now shut up. Bert and I are going to be busy.”

Jock sat with his hands in the pockets of his ragged trousers, watching the two men poring over charts and maps, working with sextants and dividers, and jotting down countless figures on slips of paper.

“That’s about it, then,” said Kenyon, at length. “By leaving here in an hour’s time we should reach Bleakmoor when the prisoners are exercising in the morning. We’ll—— Hi, stop him, Bert!”

With a shout of alarm Kenyon jumped up. Bert whirled round, to see Jock leaping towards the controls of the Mole, a heavy spanner in his hand. The moorland lad meant to disable the earth crawler!

Kenyon and Bert sprang across the cabin. The outlaw caught hold of Jock’s upraised arm just as he had been about to crash it down upon the control panel.

“You young fool!” rasped Kenyon. “Do you want to imprison us all down in the bowels of the earth?”

For the first time Jock was showing signs of fear. He thought Kenyon to be a ruthless gangster, and now he expected no mercy. But to his surprise, neither Kenyon nor Bert drew a gun. The outlaw actually smiled, although a trifle grimly, and then released him.

“Jock,” said Kenyon, “you’re a young idiot, but you’ve certainly got pluck. Now, don’t attempt any more silly stunts like that. I know you want to see us captured, but to disable the Mole might mean that we shall all be trapped down here, with no hope of ever getting to the surface alive. Bert, keep an eye on Jock. He’s too plucky to be safe!”

Kenyon went back to his plans. Jock gazed after him with wondering eyes. Could this possibly be the outlaw who had ruthlessly shot down hundreds of people, who had raided the Houses of Parliament, who had committed a score of other crimes?

“Gosh!” breathed Jock to himself. “He’s no crook!”

The following morning the Mole arrived at Bleakmoor Prison. The amazing underground tank gently nosed up from out of the bowels of the earth until it was less than ten feet below the surface of the yard where the convicts were marching round and round under the watchful eye of armed warders.

When the depth gauge registered ten feet only, Kenyon pulled the control switch hard across. Under every ounce of power the slowly revolving blades whirled into frenzied life with a terrific grinding roar, the ground up above heaved madly, and as the startled convicts fled for their lives the Mole burst into view amidst a flying cloud of earth and stones.

As she heaved herself up into the prison yard her gas ports slid back, and from them poured a dense cloud of yellow gas, which spread with frightful rapidity.

The frantic warders bellowed harsh orders at the scattered convicts, but as the swirling, eddying gas drifted around them men fell in limp and huddled heaps on the hard ground of the prison yard.

“Does—does that gas kill?” asked Jock fearfully, peering out of a look-out port.

“No; it merely stupefies,” replied Kenyon. “These men will be all right after a few hours in the fresh air. Give them four more cylinders, Bert!”

The gas poured out denser than ever, until the grim, bleak prison, situated in the heart of the lonely moors, was enveloped in a heavy pall of deadly, yellow murk.

The gas was everywhere. It drifted through barred windows, through the windows of living quarters, swirled and eddied along corridors and up staircases. Every convict, every warder, all the occupants of the prison buildings, were rendered unconscious.

Kenyon slid back the door in the hull of the Mole. Both he and Bert were wearing gas masks, as was Jock, and Kenyon paused for a parting word with the lad.

“Bert and I are going out to find Crayshaw,” he said, “so now’s the time for you to make a bolt for it, if you want to. We’re not stopping you.”

But Jock didn’t make a bolt for it. For one thing, he was very puzzled about these two chaps. They had treated him very decently, and, apart from that, Jock was beginning to think they were not the crooks people made them out to be.

It was absolutely certain that they were after Zworge, and Jock very much wanted to see what happened. So he stayed where he was, peering through the yellow murk at Kenyon and Bert, who were swiftly examining the huddled forms of the unconscious convicts.

Suddenly he saw them pause, hold a brief consultation, then pick up the limp form of the man and carry him towards the Mole.

“Is this Crayshaw?” demanded Jock, staring with interest at the unconscious convict whom they dumped on the floor inside the hull.

“Yes, that’s the fellow!” nodded Kenyon. “But aren’t you clearing out? Go on, lad, we don’t want you here!”

Jock hesitated.

“I—I’d like to stay,” he burst out nervously. “I believe what you’ve told me. I don’t think you’re crooks at all. Maybe I can help a bit. I’d like to, if you’d let me stay.”

“No, it’s too dangerous,” said Kenyon. “Go on, lad, hop off!”

“No!” said Jock resolutely. “Not if you’ll let me stay. I can help you when we surface. Go scouting for you, and things!”

“Lumme, but there’s something in that,” said Bert, staring.

“But can we trust you?” demanded Kenyon.

“Yes, you can,” cried Jock earnestly. “Honestly, you can. I’m not a fool, sir. I’ve seen all I want to see, and now I know you’re straight. Do let me stay!”

“All right, then,” said Kenyon. “But I’m not letting you run that head of yours into any danger when we get up against Zworge, so don’t think it!”

With that, he pressed the switch, the door slid shut, and the motors purred into life. The gas ports were already closed, and under the pull of her gyro-motor the Mole dropped her whirling nose and burrowed down into the depths of the earth, leaving behind her the silent yard of Bleakmoor prison, wherein lay the unconscious forms of convicts and warders.

CHAPTER XIII

FORCING A CONFESSION

CONSCIOUSNESS returned slowly to Crayshaw, but when it did he struggled to rise. Getting himself to a sitting posture, he blinked stupidly round the interior of the Mole, for the gas fumes were still addling his wits, and his head was aching agonisedly.

He now made a second discovery. His feet and hands were securely lashed. That accounted for the difficulty he had had in getting himself to a sitting position.

He was a stocky, muscular fellow, blue-chinned and of prodigious strength, but he knew that in his present condition it would be hopeless to attempt to wrench himself free of his bonds.

His bloodshot eyes roved from the brown-faced Jock to Bert, and from the latter to Kenyon, who was seated at the controls of the earth crawler.

“So it was you!” he burst out hoarsely.

“Yes. Sorry to disappoint you!” said Kenyon pleasantly. “I suppose you thought it was Zworge come to rescue you?”

“What do you want with me, curse you?”

“I’ll tell you later!”

About half an hour later, during which time Crayshaw writhed and threshed helplessly in his bonds, Kenyon brought the Mole to rest eighteen hundred feet below the ground.

Cutting out the motors, he rose to his feet and turned to Crayshaw.

“Now, Crayshaw,” he said, “what I want to know is the location of Zworge’s headquarters. As you know to your cost, Hangman’s Hall has been raided by the police, but Zworge has gone to earth somewhere. Where?”

“I don’t know,” snarled Crayshaw.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure!” shouted Crayshaw furiously. “And what’s more, I wouldn’t tell you if I did know!”

Kenyon said nothing, but he made a sign to Bert. In response to the gesture, Bert switched on a small electric brazier which they used for welding and soldering.

On to this brazier Bert placed a thick metal pot, with a doubled length of lead piping in it. Then he, Kenyon, and Jock sat down to a meal of tinned salmon, biscuits, and tinned milk!

That was the astonishing thing to Crayshaw. They never said another word to him, or even looked at him. Crayshaw began to feel uneasy. What the devil was their game?

His bloodshot eyes turned again to the brazier. On it he could see the pot, in which the lead piping was now melting.

Kenyon, Jock, and Bert were eating in silence. Their silence got on Crayshaw’s nerves, which were already badly ragged with what he’d been through.

“Look here, what’s the game?” he snarled.

Kenyon looked at him.

“Where is Zworge’s secret headquarters?” he asked.

“I tell you I don’t know!” shouted Crayshaw furiously. “How the blazes can I tell you when I don’t know?”

This time he didn’t say that he wouldn’t tell them even if he did know. It was evident that even at this early stage of the proceedings Mr. Crayshaw was losing his nerve.

He watched Kenyan, Bert, and Jock finish their meal in silence after that. He wondered where the brown-faced lad had come from and what he was doing aboard the Mole.

The meal finished, the two men and the boy rose and approached him.

“You have had all the time I intend to give you,” said Kenyon sternly. “For the last time—where is Zworge’s secret headquarters?”

“I’ve told you I don’t know, you fool!” screamed Crayshaw.

Kenyon turned to Bert.

“Right-ho, Bert, come on!” he said.

Next instant the frantically struggling Crayshaw was seized and lashed hand and foot to the control chair, which was swung round away from the controls.

“Now off with his boot, Bert!”

Dropping on one knee, Bert swiftly unlaced Crayshaw’s boot, and pulled it and the sock off, leaving the foot bare.

“Now the pot!” said Kenyon grimly.

Wrapping a cloth round the pot, Bert lifted it off the brazier and placed it on the floor beside Crayshaw. The convict looked down into it. It was a-swim with fiery, molten lead.

“This is going to be very painful for you, Crayshaw,” said Kenyon. “It’s a pity you don’t know where Zworge’s headquarters are, or you would not have to undergo this little operation!”

Some glimmering of the dreadful truth came to Crayshaw and cold sweat started on his brow.

“What are you going to do?” he asked hoarsely.

“It’s just a little experiment in torture,” said Kenyon. “In the old days they used an iron boot filled with molten lead. We haven’t an iron boot, so we’re using a pot, which will be just as effective. I am going to put your bare foot in that molten lead, Crayshaw!”

“You devil!” burst out Crayshaw. And then his voice rose to a scream. “You can’t do it! It’s impossible—it’s inhuman!”

“Who are you to talk about what is inhuman?” grated Kenyon, his eyes blazing. “Think of the innocent people you and the Zworge gang have brutally murdered! Now it’s your turn to suffer, Crayshaw!”

Crayshaw screamed and writhed in his bonds. Then his voice broke, and he sobbed for mercy.

“Yes, you shall have mercy!” rasped Kenyon. “Just the mercy you and your pals showed your victims. After I’ve burned one foot off, Crayshaw, the other goes in. Then your hands, and after that——”

Jock shuddered, Bert went pale, and as for Crayshaw, he raved like a madman.

“That’s enough of that!” cut in Kenyon sternly. “Hold the pot, Bert!”

Dropping to his knees, Bert seized the pot with the cloth, and held it steady. Gripping Crayshaw’s ankle, Kenyon slowly and remorselessly thrust the man’s bare foot into the pot, until it was less than an inch from the molten lead.

“If only you knew where Zworge’s headquarters were you’d save yourself all this,” he remarked.

Crayshaw groaned. Already he could feel his foot being scorched by the fierce heat which rose from the molten lead. The tip of one toe touched that dreadful liquid.

Crayshaw screamed, his voice shrill with agony. His nerve broke.

“I’ll tell you!” he shrieked. “I’ll tell you, you devil!”

“Ah, that’s better!” said Kenyon, and inwardly heaved a sigh of heartfelt relief that his bluff had succeeded. “A pity you didn’t decide to tell me earlier. You’d have saved yourself a lot of unpleasantness and me a lot of unnecessary trouble!”

Crayshaw made no response. He had collapsed in a nerveless sobbing heap.

“Where are Zworge’s headquarters?” demanded Kenyon.

“At Gorse Grange, a lonely house on the Yorkshire moors,” groaned Crayshaw.

Kenyon and Bert exchanged triumphant glances.

“Can you pin-point it on the map for us?” asked Kenyon.

Crayshaw hesitated, but only for a moment as he thought of the torture which would be his fate on refusal.

“Yes!” he gulped.

“Very well; you will do so!” nodded Kenyon. “And you will come along there with us. If I find you have lied, you’ll be sorry!”

“I have not lied!” cut in Crayshaw hoarsely. “What are you going to do with me when you get to Gorse Grange?”

“You will see when we get there!” replied Kenyon grimly. “Bring that map here, Jock!”

• • • • •

Throughout the remainder of that fateful day and during the short hours of the summer night, the Mole bored her way steadily northwards towards Yorkshire.

Crayshaw, with one hand freed from his bonds, spent most of the time in drawing a detailed plan of Gorse Grange and its grounds.

“How do we know he’s not lyin’, guv’nor?” asked Bert once, as he and Kenyon examined a rough plan of the ground-floor rooms.

“He’s too terrified to lie!” said Kenyon confidently. “But I’m not risking approaching Gorse Grange under cover of night before I’ve had a look at it in daylight. You remember how Hangman’s Hall was practically an electrified fortress?”

“Don’t I!” said Bert feelingly. “And I’ll bet this Gorse Grange is worse. They’ll have electric alarms and guards posted, and goodness knows what else!”

“Exactly!” agreed Kenyon. “That’s why I want to study the place in daylight.”

“You’ll be taking an awful risk!” said Bert uneasily. “If you’re spotted by the military, they won’t make the mistake that infantry captain did! They’ll shoot first time, and ask you to put your hands up second!”

Kenyon laughed.

“I’ll risk it, Bert,” he said. “I’ve got to; and, after all, Crayshaw says the place is very lonely and miles away from anywhere.”

“Well, I don’t like it, all the same!” said Bert uneasily.

Kenyon was insistent, however, and shortly before dawn the Mole quietly pushed her slowly revolving nose up through the soft moorland turf.

A port slid back. Kenyon’s face peered out, taking stock of his surroundings as far as was possible in the darkness; then the door in the hull slid open.

“Take her under at once, Bert,” he said, pausing for a final word with the man who had stuck to him through thick and thin, “and keep an eye on Crayshaw. If I were you, I’d examine his bonds every half-hour. He’s a shifty cuss, and as strong as an ox!”

“You leave him to me, gov’nor!” said Bert confidently. “I’ll pick you up at midnight to-night a mile due north of here.”

“That’s right!” nodded Kenyon. “Well, cheerio!”

He shook hands with Bert, and also with Jock, who, in the short time he had been aboard the Mole, had already fitted in as part of the crew and lost all his first black suspicions of Kenyon and Bert.

Stepping back, Kenyon saw the Mole’s blades revolve slowly into life, watched her burrow down again into the soft ground and disappear from sight. Then he moved away, seeking a clump of bushes where he could lie low until daylight came.

The Mole had surfaced within two miles of Gorse Grange. It was Kenyon’s idea to lie up somewhere near the house throughout the day, and keep a watch on it through the powerful field-glasses which he had brought with him.

By nightfall he would have a good idea of the lie of the land, and then, with any luck, would come the final showdown between him and Zworge, the master-crook.

The first faint glimmer of daylight in the eastern sky brought Kenyon from out the cover where he had been lurking, and, with a glance at his pocket compass, he struck off across the lonely moors in the direction of Gorse Grange.

The sweet, clean air of dawn was marvellously exhilarating after the long hours he had spent cooped up in the earth crawler, and Kenyon gratefully filled his lungs with it.

Daylight was coming on apace now, sweeping across the wide expanse of open moorland, and Kenyon could distinguish trees and bushes and clumps of gorse more clearly every moment.

Then suddenly he halted, tensed, with every muscle taut. To his nostrils had come the pungent smell of cigarette-smoke borne on the fresh, clean air of morning.

There was no cover near by, nowhere he could hide. The smoker was coming his way, mounting a slope which still hid him from Kenyon’s view.

Well, at that hour in the morning the lonely hiker, whoever he was, would scarcely recognise him, reflected Kenyon. He moved on.

The head and shoulders of the approaching man came into view. He topped the rise. He and Kenyon were face to face.

It was Zworge!

CHAPTER XIV

FACE TO FACE

It is difficult to say which of the two men, Zworge and Kenyon, was the more surprised at this unexpected and startling meeting.

Zworge, tensed as a spring, stood with his deep-set glittering eyes fixed on the outlaw in sheer astonishment and amaze. Then, with a swift exclamation, his hand whipped to a pocket inside his black coat.

But before he could draw a gun Kenyon had him covered. From the first moment of being aware of the man's approach, Kenyon had been prepared for trouble. And now his automatic was out covering Zworge.

"Put your hands up!" he rasped.

Zworge hesitated, then slowly his hands crept above his head.

"So," he said, and in spite of his rage his voice was almost a purr, "we meet again, my friend. Is it permitted to ask what has brought you to these lonely moors at this early hour of the morning?"

"Can't you guess?" grated the outlaw.

"Why, yes, of course," returned Zworge. "You have come to spy on my house. Perhaps you even intended forcing an entry. As I have said before, you are either a very brave man, or a very great fool. I have never been able to decide which it is. You have the Mole near here?"

"Never mind about the Mole!" snapped Kenyon. "You're coming with me, Zworge!"

"And what do you intend to do?" asked the master-crook evenly.

"Hand you over to the police after I've forced out of you a confession of my innocence," replied the outlaw. "Following that, Gorse Grange will be raided and the whole of your gang will be rounded up."

Zworge laughed, soft and evil laughter which made Kenyon stare at him more closely. Was it possible that the crook had something up his sleeve? Kenyon decided that the sooner he moved his prisoner from the vicinity the better.

So, stepping forward a pace, he said harshly:

"Get a move on and keep your hands up! Make for that clump of trees over there!"

Obediently Zworge commenced to walk in the direction indicated, his hands still raised above his head, Kenyon's gun in the small of his back.

But the outlaw was worried. Now that he had so unexpectedly and easily captured the master-crook, what was he to do with him until midnight?

The Mole was not surfacing until then, and Kenyon had no means of getting in touch with it. All he had intended doing was to see how the land lay around Gorse Grange and to spy on the house with powerful field-glasses preparatory to his raid on it after midnight.

And now Zworge had fallen into his hands. It was no use marching his prisoner into the nearest village and handing him over to the police, for he himself would also be promptly arrested.

No. Kenyon had to keep both himself and Zworge out of the hands of the police until he had forced a complete confession as to his innocence from the master-crook.

“Would you mind if I lowered my hands?” said Zworge pleasantly, his voice cutting in on Kenyon’s thoughts. “It is so uncomfortable keeping them up like this?”

There was mocking laughter in Zworge’s voice. The crook had something up his sleeve—was planning something—but what could it be?

“Keep your hands up or I’ll drill you!” warned Kenyon grimly.

They reached the clump of trees, in the shadowy depths of which was a hollow—a natural hiding-place. At the point of the gun Kenyon forced his prisoner into the hollow, and then proceeded to bind Zworge’s arms and ankles with strips of cloth torn from the crook’s cloak. Zworge showed not the slightest resistance.

“I do not see any sign of your Mole, my friend,” he remarked, with a mocking smile.

As the Mole wasn’t surfacing until midnight, and then not at this particular spot, it wasn’t surprising that he saw no sign of it. But Kenyon said nothing. Making sure that his prisoner’s bonds were securely tied, he sat down on guard, his gun near at hand.

The outlaw realised that he would have to lie low here with Zworge until darkness fell—until the Mole surfaced. After that it would be easy to force a confession of the whole truth out of Zworge.

Kenyon knew that the man’s nerve, although like steel, had its breaking point. He’d found that breaking point before when he had had Zworge in his power at Hangman’s Hall, and he’d find it again when he had him aboard the Mole—

“Listen!” said Zworge softly, his voice cutting in on Kenyon’s thoughts.

Kenyon listened, his head inclined. On the stillness of early morning came a faint and distant baying.

“What is it?” snapped Kenyon, for the baying appeared to be heading in their direction.

“Don’t you recognise the sound?” purred Zworge.

“By Jove!” exclaimed Kenyon. “They’re hounds!”

“Yes, hounds!” agreed Zworge, with a mocking grin. “My hounds. You see, I am never fool enough to take my solitary walks without also taking precautions to ensure my safe return. Orders are always left with Rafe, my second-in-command, that if I have not returned by a certain time, the hounds are to be set loose to find me!”

“And suppose the police nabbed you whilst you were taking one of your walks?” demanded Kenyon, listening to the baying, which was growing steadily louder as it headed in their direction. “What good would your hounds be then?”

“Only this,” replied Zworge. “They would show Rafe and the others that I had been taken to some village—which would mean that I had been captured—and my earth crawler would make short work of everyone there and rescue me!”

“I see!” said Kenyon grimly. “You think of everything, don’t you, Zworge?”

“I endeavour to do so!” mocked Zworge. “But what about you, my friend? Don’t you intend to escape before my hounds and men get here?”

Kenyon looked at his automatic and the one he had taken from Zworge.

“I’m going to remain here and stand them off!” he said determinedly. “I don’t intend losing you without a fight, Zworge!”

The eyes of the master-crook glittered triumphantly. Breasting a rise in the ground about a quarter of a mile away, a gang of men now appeared, the foremost of them holding four massive and deep-chested hounds by strong leashes.

As they topped the rise the dogs gave tongue again in deep, menacing tones, and the gang of men, with guns in their hands, swept on towards the wood where Kenyon and Zworge had taken cover.

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During the few moments’ respite still left to him before the attack was launched, Kenyon feverishly bound Zworge’s ankles tighter together and took the precaution of gagging the writhing, squirming master-crook.

That done, he flung himself full length behind a bush and took careful aim with his automatic at the leading hound.

Above the excited baying of the massive brutes sounded the sudden whip-like crack of a shot as the blue-black barrel of Kenyon’s automatic spouted crimson flame.

With a quivering howl the leading hound sprang into the air, then crashed heavily back on its haunches and rolled over dead. The gangsters flung themselves flat on their faces and levelled their guns and rifles.

Next instant a crashing salvo of shots shattered the stillness of morning, and a stream of bullets whipped through the trees and undergrowth.

But at the moment the advantage lay with Kenyon. For he could see his assailants, whereas they could not see him. Nor could they have any idea how many men were hidden in the clump of trees, for, having fired one shot, Kenyon wriggled swiftly away to another clump of bushes and fired from there.

The spurt of smoke from the muzzle of his gun was obviously seen by the gangsters, for a stream of bullets whistled low over his head, crashing through the bushes.

But Kenyon was already wriggling swiftly backwards. Gaining fresh cover, he fired two swift shots and then changed position again.

The outlaw counted ten gangsters, and with the three hounds, they made a formidable attacking party. Kenyon knew the fight would soon be over if they had the sense to rush the clump of trees. It was only his foresight in swiftly and continually changing his position under cover that was holding the gangsters off.

They were quite certain that the clump of trees was being held by a body of armed men, and at a curt word from the tall and sinister-looking Rafe, who was in charge of the party, they slithered backwards along the ground in order to withdraw for a council of war.

They fired as they retreated, but, not knowing where to fire, their shots were harmless. Nor did they themselves retire scathless. Kenyon sent four more shots crashing after them, and two of the gangsters had to be helped back over the crest of the ridge by their furious comrades. Kenyon was not aiming to kill—only to disable the men.

“Well, what’s to be done?” snarled Rafe. “Zworge’s in there all right, but we don’t

know who's holding him, and how many of 'em there are!"

"If you ask me," growled a swarthy-faced fellow named Kolmann, "there're not many of them. They didn't answer our fire with a volley. Just single shot from here and there."

"And those shots were revolver shots," chimed in another. "You could tell by the sound. So it's not the soldiers who have got Zworge, and it's not the police either, if you ask me!"

"What makes you think it isn't the police?" demanded Rafe quickly.

"Well, if it was the police I reckon they'd have shown themselves and called on us to surrender," explained the man.

"Something in that," agreed Rafe. "So, if it isn't the military, and if it isn't the police, who the devil has got Zworge? But I know what I'm going to do. Unleash the dogs and let 'em make straight for the trees!"

"And what good will that do?" growled Kolmann. "They'll only be shot stone dead!"

"Yes, but we'll see where those shots come from, and count how many are fired," said Rafe sharply. "That will give us an idea of how many men are in cover there. Don't you realise, you fool, that we've got to get this shooting over before the whole cursed countryside is roused?"

"Yes, I guess that's right!" assented Kolmann. "The sound of the fire will carry miles, and before we know where we are we'll have a squad of armed police swarming here from every little village on the moors!"

"And a big military camp, with tanks and guns, has been established over at Garthdale," said one of the men. "They may be on their way here already, for all we know!"

"Yes, we've got to get a move on!" snapped Rafe. "Unleash the hounds, and every man watch that clump of trees for shots. No, wait—wait!"

He grabbed the nearest man by the arm before the fellow could unleash the hound he was holding, and as the gang listened with straining ears, they heard the faint and distant drone of an approaching aero-engine.

"It's an aeroplane!" cried Rafe. "Probably one of the Air Force machines from Catterick. Scatter, everybody, and don't show yourselves!"

Swiftly the gang scattered, going to cover beside the gorse with which the ground was dotted. The well-trained hounds lay still and rigid, flattened to the ground.

Swiftly the roar of the approaching aeroplane grew in volume until out of the faint mists of morning came thundering a fast, single-seater scout.

Rafe, lying flat in cover, peered up, to see the helmeted head of the pilot leaning out of the cockpit as he scanned the ground below.

"He's been sent out to spot what the shooting was," Rafe muttered to Kolmann. "Oh, curse it, he's circling! He must have seen us!"

The pilot was circling—and, what was more, he had taken a powerful pair of glasses from the rack by his elbow, and with them he was searching the gorse-covered ground below.

He was a sharp-eyed young fellow who, as Rafe had surmised, had been sent out from Catterick to discover the reason of the distant shooting on the moors.

Roaring low over the gorse, he had seen what looked to him like a man flattened out in cover, and as he pressed the powerful glasses to his eyes he gave vent to an exclamation of astonishment as the figures of ten men and three hounds swam into his lenses.

The men had rifles with them, and, realising that there was something here that required looking into, the pilot shoved the glasses back into their rack and pushed forward the control stick.

Under closing throttle, the roar of the engine died away and the nose of the machine dropped for a landing near the gangsters.

“Give me that rifle!” barked Rafe to Kolmann, who was lying beside him.

Taking the weapon, he rolled over on his side, raised the blue-black barrel, and took long and careful aim at the circling machine.

“Go on, man, let him have it!” whispered Kolmann, his voice tense with excitement.

“Shut up!” snarled Rafe.

Deliberately he held his fire as the machine circled lower and lower. Then, as the slowly revolving propellor swam into the sights, followed by the sleek and glistening cowl of the engine, Rafe pressed the trigger.

He was a first-class marksman, and with the sharp, whip-like crack of the exploding cartridge, the young pilot jerked upwards in his seat, to crash forward over the controls, a limp and huddled heap.

The weight of the pilot’s body threw the control stick violently forward, the plane dropped its nose vertically, and, out of control, spun earthwards. It hit the ground with a terrific, splintering crash.

Rafe jumped to his feet.

“There’s no time to spare!” he shouted. “Release the hounds at once!”

Kolmann grabbed him by the arm.

“But aren’t you going to see if that fellow’s dead?” he demanded, indicating the wrecked machine, which was lying with its tail sticking out from a torn and twisted mass of wood and fabric.

“He is dead!” said Rafe harshly. “I never miss when I can see my target!”

He wheeled on the other men, who had risen to their feet.

“Release the hounds, I tell you!” he said furiously. “There’ll be other machines here, besides that one. Every man count the shots which come out from the wood!”

Cautiously the gangsters approached the top of the ridge. The hounds were released. The men dropped on their knees, their eyes fixed on the clump of trees.

Kenyon, waiting there with face grim and set, saw the three huge mastiffs come bounding towards him. He had seen the cold-blooded killing of the Air Force pilot, and had been powerless to do anything to prevent it.

He had not seen Rafe actually raise the rifle, for the gangster had been hidden from view behind the ridge. But he had heard the crack of the rifle, audible above the whine of the engine, and had seen the pilot leap to his feet before collapsing lifelessly over the controls.

“Just another murder, for which you and your gang will hang, Zworge!” he said

harshly to the master-crook, who, livid-faced, was struggling furiously in his bonds.

For Zworge had been utterly taken aback by the cool manner in which Kenyon had stood the gangsters off, and he was beginning to wonder if he would be rescued, after all.

But through the bushes which hid him from the view of his men he suddenly saw the three great hounds bounding towards him and Kenyon, their savage eyes glinting blood-red, the saliva dripping from their cruel jaws.

Zworge grinned in triumph and relaxed in his bonds. Kenyon would have to be a swift shot, and an amazingly good one, to pick off the brutes before they could reach him.

But Kenyon was a good shot, and his revolver spoke once—twice—thrice!

At the first and second shots a hound leaped up in full career, with head flung back, before toppling to the ground in a limp and twitching heap.

But the third shot brought only a snarl of rage from the one remaining hound, and it came on in furious charge, lips drawn back from gleaming fangs, blood-red eyes blazing with savage cruelty and the lust to kill.

Next instant the brute leaped over the undergrowth and sprang at Kenyon. He fired again, full in its face, then the whole weight of the brute's great body struck him, and he went over backwards, his head striking the stump of a long-fallen tree.

Now was the time for the gangsters to rush the clump of trees. Kenyon was out—out to the wide—and Zworge struggled like a madman in his bonds, striving to free himself of his gag, so that he could shout to Rafe and the others to come up at the double before Kenyon regained his senses.

But the gag had been tied too securely, and Zworge had the bitter mortification of seeing his enemy lying stunned and motionless, with the body of the hound atop of him, whilst Rafe and the gangsters peered from the ridge towards the trees.

"The fools! Why don't they rush the place?"

Zworge nearly went mad as he squirmed, writhed, and threshed in his bonds, but still Rafe and the rest of the gang remained where they were.

"Four shots," Rafe was saying to Kolmann. "And all came from the same spot!"

"No one else fired," agreed Kolmann, "and every one of 'em would have shot at the dogs. There's only one man in there, Rafe!"

"Yes, one I think; but two at the most!" agreed Rafe. "All right, we'll try a rush. Pass the word round to spread out and rush the wood!"

Amidst the trees Kenyon was stirring. One weak, out-thrust hand felt the heavy and still warm body of the hound which was lying on top of him, almost suffocating him with its weight.

It was this which brought Kenyon round quicker than anything. Recollection flooded back on him as he strove to rid himself of the body of the hound, and as he remembered what had happened, he summoned all his strength into a desperate effort and pushed the brute aside.

Then, picking up his fallen guns, he staggered to his feet and peered through the trees. What he saw showed him that he hadn't been an instant too soon. The gangsters had topped the ridge and were rushing towards the trees, their rifles to the ready.

Kenyon had no time to reload, but he still had eight cartridges left. Two were in his

own gun and six in the gun he had taken from Zworge, for he had reloaded with the cartridges in his pocket before the hounds had been released.

The gangsters were within fifteen paces of him when Kenyon's guns roared into life. Three men dropped, all wounded in the leg. Then Kenyon flung himself flat on his stomach in the undergrowth, for a furious volley from the guns of the surviving gangsters whistled over his head.

But again the advantage lay all with Kenyon. He could see his assailants and pick them off, whilst they could see nothing at all of him, and could only guess his whereabouts by the smoke spurts which came from his guns amidst the bushes.

It was Rafe, cursing savagely with a bullet through the arm, who led the retreat, for to Rafe it looked like certain death to plunge into the middle of those bushes.

They left four wounded men lying a few paces short of the trees, but the survivors regained the cover of the ridge unscathed. Little did they realise how near to success they had been.

For Kenyon had only a few cartridges left, and, apart from that, the sound of firing and non-return of the aeroplane must lead to soldiers or police arriving on the scene at any moment.

And the outlaw had no more desire to fall into the hands of the police than had Zworge or any of the gangsters. Kenyon knew perfectly well that the whole country believed him to be in league with Zworge.

"Well, what are we going to do now?" snarled Kolmann. "I'm not rushing that wood again, so don't you think it!"

"No, it's hopeless!" said Rafe savagely. "It's asking for death. He must be a cool 'un, whoever he is, to hold his fire as long as he did that time. We were almost on him before he opened out. But we can't leave Zworge!"

"To the devil with Zworge!" blazed Kolmann. "I vote we return to Gorse Grange, split the loot, and clear out. The game's up! We can't rescue Zworge without remaining here, and we daren't remain here after all this shooting."

"I know that," muttered Rafe: "but we can't abandon Zworge. He's the master mind. We've got to save him!"

"Yes; but how—how?" shouted Kolmann furiously. "I tell you there's nothing we can do!"

"Isn't there?" grated Rafe, seizing him by the arm, his eyes glittering with sudden fierce triumph. "By thunder, but there is! I know how we can get that skunk in there, and get him stone cold!"

"How can we get him?" repeated Kolmann harshly. "He's armed; he's in ambush, and he's a cursed good shot. I don't see how we can get him."

"No, perhaps you don't!" snarled Rafe, second-in-command of Zworge's gang. "But I do! D'you see that?"

He pointed to the wrecked aeroplane, the pilot of which the gangster had shot dead with a rifle as he was bringing the machine down, in order to investigate this mysterious shooting on the lonely Yorkshire moors.

"Well, what about it?" demanded Kolmann, staring at the crumpled wreckage. "How

the deuce does that help us?"

"It's a fighting scout!" explained Rafe excitedly. "It'll be fitted with a machine-gun. If we can get the gun out of the wreckage, we'll be able to rake that clump of trees with it, and get whoever's lurking there. And we've got to be quick about it. All this firing will have been heard, and there'll be soldiers or police here before very long, and other aircraft out searching for this fellow."

Rafe, Kolmann and two other gangsters raced to the wreckage of the fighting scout. There was a fully equipped toolbox beneath the pilot's seat, and within a few moments the men were feverishly dismantling the machine-gun.

Zworge was still lying trussed and gagged in the wood, writhing and squirming desperately in frenzied efforts to free himself from his bonds.

Near him crouched Kenyon, peering out of the bushes towards the ridge behind which the gangsters were hidden from his sight.

"I think they've gone," the outlaw said suddenly, turning to Zworge. "I am going to release your ankles, and you and I are getting out of here. But I warn you; at the first false move I shall shoot you dead!"

Zworge made no answer. He could not on account of his gag. But he took one look at Kenyon's grim, set face, and he knew that the man whom he had ruined, and so deeply wronged, meant every word he said.

Taking one more glance through the bushes, Kenyon pocketed his gun, and turning to Zworge, proceeded to cut the bonds about the ankles of the master-crook.

"Come on!" he said, hoisting Zworge roughly to his feet. "Get going! We'll leave on the other side of the trees."

Zworge stood where he was, his hands lashed tightly behind his back, the gag pulled tight across his mouth. Only his eyes showed signs of his sudden triumph, and, noting their cruel and baleful glitter, Kenyon swung on his heel and peered out through the bushes.

As he did so he let out an exclamation of dismay. For advancing on the wood was Rafe, Kolmann, and the other gangsters, and under Rafe's arm was the deadly machine-gun taken from the wrecked aeroplane.

Whipping out his gun, Kenyon seized Zworge by the arm, and yanked him away.

"Come on! We're getting out of this," he grated.

But Zworge wasn't to be shifted so easily. In that wicked-looking machine-gun he saw something which spelt his own rescue, and now he began to struggle like a madman.

Kenyon could have abandoned Zworge and made a dash for safety himself, but the outlaw had gone through great peril to retain his prisoner, and he wasn't going to give him up without a fight.

So he stayed where he was, endeavouring with his one free hand to pull the desperately struggling Zworge away from the fringe of the bushes.

Realising, however, that all his efforts to shift the master-crook must be doomed to failure, Kenyon suddenly clenched his fist and sent it crashing to the villain's jaw.

Zworge went limp and sagged at the knees, but before he could slither to the ground, Kenyon had grabbed him and slung him over his shoulder.

Thus burdened, Kenyon turned and commenced to blunder his way through the clump of trees. As he did so the machine-gun suddenly opened fire, the bullets whistling and crashing their way through leaves and branches in a deadly stream, which caused Kenyon to drop his prisoner, and fall flat on his face.

The gangsters hadn't sighted Kenyon yet; but they knew that he and Zworge were somewhere amongst the trees, and they knew that, if possible, Zworge would be taking cover from the bullets. In any case, if they were to rescue him they had to risk hitting him.

Whipping out his own gun, which he had been forced to pocket, Kenyon waited until Rafe or one of the other gangsters should show himself. Above the deadly rattle of the machine-gun sounded the crashing of bushes as the attackers entered the clump of trees and undergrowth which Rafe was spraying with the stream of bullets from the gun.

Then suddenly Kenyon saw Rafe, a vague and indistinct figure behind the brushwood. Instantly Kenyon's finger tightened on the trigger of his gun, but before he could fire something heavy and bulky descended with crushing force on his back.

It was Kolmann who had crept up on the flank, and his gun descended with smashing force on the outlaw's skull, knocking him out to the wide.

Zworge, only partially dazed by Kenyon's blow, had recovered now, and he was jubilant. He rolled about in his bonds in a perfect frenzy of delight, and when Rafe had freed him the first thing he did was to kick the unconscious Kenyon, again and again, in the ribs with a savagery which would have broken them, had not Rafe pulled the master-crook back.

"Steady, man—steady!" panted Rafe. "You want the skunk alive, don't you?"

"Want him alive!" panted Zworge, his green eyes glittering with hate. "Yes, by fury; I want him alive! I want him to die a thousand deaths before eventually death comes to him as a merciful end to save him from further torture. But come! We've got to get out of this, Rafe, and get out of it quickly!"

The gangsters did. They lost no time in picking up Kenyon and carrying him swiftly across the plain towards Gorse Grange.

"The police or military will be here before long!" That was what worried Zworge. "If they didn't hear the rifle-fire and the automatics, they would certainly hear that machine-gun of yours, Rafe. By fury, but that was a grand idea! I am pleased with you!"

"Thanks!" said Rafe dryly. "I'll be better pleased with myself when I am safely home!"

That was the feeling of them all, and, to their infinite relief, they encountered nobody between the scene of the shooting and Gorse Grange, their lonely and sinister-looking headquarters.

Having carried Kenyon indoors and seen to the securing of the doors, Rafe turned to Zworge.

"Where's the Mole?" he asked.

"Under the ground somewhere," replied Zworge. "I could get nothing out of Kenyon, but if it had surfaced he would have tried to reach it when he took me prisoner. I don't know where it is, but I'll get the information out of Kenyon or tear his cursed tongue out by the roots——"

He broke off as Kolmann came hurrying into the room. One look at Kolmann's face told both Zworge and Rafe that something was far wrong.

"Well, what is it!" Zworge grated. "What's the matter?"

"There's a squad of police coming across the moors," reported Kolmann. "They're heading this way, and there's no doubt that they're coming here!"

Zworge rushed to the window and glared out. Kolmann had spoken the truth. Away beyond the wall which surrounded the grounds of Gorse Grange was a large force of uniformed police marching towards the house!

CHAPTER XV

ZWORGE MAKES A MISTAKE!

“WELL, what are you going to do?” demanded Rafe. “Do we show our hand, or what?”

“No, you fool, of course we don’t show our hand!” snarled Zworge. “I’m known around these parts as Dr. Diluski and it’s as the doctor that I’m going to meet these idiots of policemen. Now get out of sight, all of you except Yaki, and take Kenyon with you!”

It was some few minutes later that the police reached the gates of the grounds and came up the drive towards the massive front door of the house.

With the police was Inspector Carter of Scotland Yard, and in response to his ring the door was opened by Yaki, Zworge’s Mongolian manservant.

Yaki was a hideously deformed dwarf with an enormous head, little slits of eyes, and a wide, leering mouth. His shoulders were of colossal breadth, and his arms hung down in front of him gorilla-like.

The inspector stared at him momentarily aghast, for in all his long experience he had never seen anyone so hideous to look at as the deformed hunchback Yaki.

“Is your master at home?” demanded the inspector. “Dr. Diluski!”

“Dr. Diluski is always at home!” growled the dwarf, his slit-like eyes riveted on the inspector with all the hostility of a wild animal. “What do you want with him?”

“I wish to see him!” said the inspector curtly, and stepped past the dwarf into the wide and spacious hallway of Gorse Grange.

Four policemen entered the house with him. The others remained outside, moving casually away from the door and round the building until they had the house quietly but efficiently surrounded.

“I do not know whether Dr. Diluski will see you,” began the dwarf truculently. “He is always very busy with his writings and does not wish to be disturbed——”

“You go and tell him I wish to see him at once!” cut in the inspector sharply, his eyes taking quick and expert note of the furnishings of the hallway and staircase.

There was certainly nothing to indicate that the house was other than the abode of the foreign doctor who had taken the lonely place some months ago in order to have peace and quietude for his writings upon the human frame and anatomy.

But the inspector was suspicious, and he wheeled quickly as a door opened off the hallway and a voice said courteously:

“Did you wish to see me?”

Inspector Carter stared hard at the slim, grave-faced man standing there in the doorway, wearing a loosely fitting black alpaca jacket and a tight, black skull cap.

“Are you Dr. Diluski?” he demanded.

“I am,” said Zworge, with a slight inclination of the head.

He was feeling quite safe, was Zworge, for none had ever seen him except Kenyon and his own gangsters. The police had no photograph of him, nor had they even a

description of him.

Consequently Zworge hadn't the slightest fear of being recognised, and this visit from the police was affording him vast inward amusement.

But in spite of his amusement and composure, Zworge didn't feel any too good when the grim-faced inspector suddenly marched up to him.

The master-crook stiffened, and his eyes narrowed—points which were not lost upon Inspector Carter—for it seemed to the master-crook that, in spite of his confidence that none knew him to be Zworge, he was going to be arrested.

Yet he stood his ground with a calmness which proved the steel-like quality of his nerve, and when he spoke his voice betrayed nothing except curiosity.

"Might I ask what this intrusion means?" he said. "Who are you, sir, and why have you brought these uniformed policemen into my house?"

"I am Inspector Carter of Scotland Yard," replied the plainclothes man curtly. "I have a warrant to search your house, and I intend to put it into execution!"

Zworge spread out his well-kept hands with a gesture of amaze.

"A warrant to search my house!" he exclaimed. "Why, inspector, what ever do you expect to find?"

The inspector stared hard at him. Zworge met that searching gaze unwaveringly.

"I am looking for Zworge and his gang," said the inspector. "Unfortunately we haven't got a description of the man, but we think he is in this neighbourhood somewhere!"

"But not in this house, surely?" exclaimed Zworge, in tones of amazed credulity. "Why, my dear, good sir, there is no one in the house except myself and Yaki, my servant, who looks after my simple wants."

"What are you doing here?" demanded the inspector brusquely. "Why do you live here all alone?"

"I am writing a book," explained Zworge suavely. "I like quietude, although it has not been very quiet this morning. Yaki and I heard firing out on the moors—the firing of many guns. I suppose it is the soldiers practising at the ranges, yes?"

"No," retorted the inspector curtly, "it was a fight between men at present unknown to us. Have you seen any suspicious characters hanging around here?"

"No, none!" replied Zworge. "Of course, this house is very lonely, and one often sees gipsies and tramps. But, apart from them, I have seen no one at all suspicious-looking. Yaki, however, may be able to give you more information than I can. Shall I ring for him?"

"No, it doesn't matter," said the inspector, still staring hard at the master-crook, who was carrying off this dangerous situation with such coolness. "With your permission, we will now search the house."

"Do so, by all means," said Zworge readily. "I do assure you, however, that you are wasting your time. No one could get in here in order to hide without being seen by Yaki or myself!"

"No, perhaps not," grunted Inspector Carter, turning away. "However, we'll see what we can find!"

He gave an order to the four uniformed policemen, and under his direction they started

a careful search of the house, whilst the rest of the squad waited outside, their guns close to hand.

The house was searched and re-searched from basement to attic, but not a sign of the gangsters was to be found. Zworge, sitting in his study, making a pretence of writing, hugged himself delightedly as he heard the policemen tramping about in the rooms overhead.

“The clods! Oh, the stupid, blundering clods!” he murmured. “They can search all day—and even then they will find nothing! What blockheads these English policemen are!”

He might have changed his opinion about that, could he have heard a conversation which was taking place in a room upstairs between Inspector Carter and a sergeant of police, named Bates.

“I’m positive we’re on the right track, Bates,” the inspector was saying. “There’s something queer about that fellow downstairs. In spite of his apparent calmness he’s on his guard. I could see it. You’re going to change clothes with me!”

“Yes, sir?” said Bates questioningly.

“Yes,” nodded the inspector, “and in this suit of mine you’re going to walk out of the house. You’re nothing like me in looks, but you’re about the same build. Diluski’s shut himself up in his study, so send one of the men in to say that the search is off, and when you’re outside keep away from the study windows.”

“But what are you going to do, sir?” demanded the sergeant, in surprise.

“I’m remaining in the house,” replied Inspector Carter. “There’s something fishy behind all this, and I’m going to find out what it is. Diluski knows more than he’s letting on. I’ll bet a month’s salary on that!”

A few minutes later the change in attire had been effected, and, leaving the inspector hiding in an upstairs attic, Sergeant Bates marched downstairs.

In the hallway he met one of the uniformed constables who had helped in the search. The man stared at Bates in astonishment, and swiftly the sergeant explained.

“The inspector’s staying here,” he said, in a low voice. “Go in there and tell Diluski that we’ve finished our search, and say we’re sorry to have bothered him!”

The constable grinned, and, moving to the study door, knocked, and entered.

“Well, found anything?” said Zworge, looking up from his writing with a smile.

“No, sir, nothing,” answered the constable. “Inspector Carter has told me to tell you that we have finished our search, and he is very sorry that you have been troubled.”

“Not at all!” smiled the pseudo Diluski. “I am only sorry that I have been unable to assist you to find this infamous scoundrel for whom you are searching. I have read of his terrible exploits in the newspapers, and they have caused me to shudder. Yes, to shudder!”

He glanced out of the window and saw the broad back of Sergeant Bates disappearing down the drive. In the distance that back looked exactly like Inspector Carter’s.

“Ah, there goes the inspector!” sighed Zworge. “I am so sorry he did not remain to partake of a glass of wine and a biscuit with me. I suppose he is disappointed, eh, at not finding his man? Tell him that any assistance I can give him at any time is his to command.”

“Thank you, sir, I will,” said the constable.

He withdrew, and from his study windows Zworge watched the squad of policemen go marching away down the drive. With them was the plainclothes Bates, whom Zworge thought was Inspector Carter. In high glee the master-crook stood rubbing his hands.

“Poor, brainless fools!” he muttered delightedly. “It’ll take smarter minds than theirs to get anything on me!”

He turned to Yaki, who had entered the room.

“Well, that’s over, Yaki!” he said to the hideously formed dwarf. “They’ll not trouble us again!”

“That remains to be seen, master!” growled the dwarf. “Shall I tell the others that the coast is clear?”

“Yes,” nodded Zworge. “But first take a look round the grounds and make certain Carter hasn’t left anyone posted there. He might be having the house watched, for all we know!”

And that was where Zworge made his first mistake. Time and again in the history of crime the overlooking of the obvious when every other detail has been perfected has led to the downfall of the crook concerned.

In this case, Zworge did not overlook the fact that Inspector Carter might be having the house watched. But what he did absolutely overlook was the fact that the astute inspector might be having the house watched from the inside, instead of from the outside.

Like a lot of other clever crooks, Zworge had a habit of under-rating the intelligence of his opponent. He had under-estimated both the intelligence and the courage of Kenyon, and that was what had brought him to the brink of disaster time and again.

And now he was under-estimating the intelligence of the man from Scotland Yard, who was hiding in a dusty and long-disused attic.

“I don’t see anyone about in the grounds,” reported Yaki, shuffling into the room after his tour of inspection. “I have set all the secret burglar alarms working again, so if anybody is out there we will hear them.”

“Excellent!” murmured Zworge. “Well, now that the coast is clear, we’d better have Rafe and the others in again. I think by this time our unfortunate friend, Mr. Kenyon, will have recovered consciousness. Go and tell them to come up!”

Yaki nodded, shuffled from the room, and made his way along the passage which led to the kitchen and the rear premises of the house.

Descending dark and narrow stone steps to the basement, he lighted a stump of candle and then pressed his thumb against the damp and uneven wall.

In response to the pressure on a cunningly disguised switch, a portion of the floor slid smoothly and silently back, giving access to a deep, square dungeon, where Rafe and the rest of the gang were lounging, smoking, and chatting until the police had gone.

None except Zworge and his men knew that the old grange had been built on the foundations of an ancient castle, the dungeons of which had never been filled in, and more excellent hiding-places than those secret dungeons it would have been hard to find.

“You’re to come up,” said Yaki, looking down into the dungeon, “and bring Kenyon with you. The master is ready for him now that the police have gone!”



[\[Facing page 165](#)

“DR. DILUSKI IS ALWAYS AT HOME!” GROWLED THE DWARF.

CHAPTER XVI

THE THREAT

INSPECTOR CARTER, listening through the half-open door of the upstairs attic, heard sounds of movement in the house.

As he listened, his face became hard and set, and a peculiar glint crept into his eyes. For the sounds he heard were the footsteps, and low, rumbling voices of many men.

He had not been mistaken, then. There was something queer about this Dr. Diluski, who was supposed to be writing a book, and the inspector was prepared to bet a year's salary that this lonely house was the headquarters of the men who had been responsible for the shooting affray out on the moors that morning.

He had to get proof of that, however, and he still had to prove that these men, whoever they were, were connected with the Zworge-Kenyon gang.

For, like the rest of the country, Inspector Carter, of Scotland Yard, still firmly believed that Kenyon was in league with Zworge, and was as guilty as the master-crook of daring robbery and brutal murder.

Listening with straining ears, the inspector heard a door close somewhere downstairs and then silence settled on the house. It was obvious that the men had entered a room.

Taking his heavy automatic from his pocket, the inspector commenced to descend the stairs. He was risking his life, and he knew it, for should his suspicions that this was the headquarters of the Zworge gang turn out to be correct, and should he be discovered, he would be mercilessly shot down.

Reaching the landing of the first floor, the man from Scotland Yard halted and listened with every nerve on the alert.

From the room downstairs came the harsh voice of the man who called himself Dr. Diluski, but the inspector could distinguish nothing of what was being said.

There were no other sounds in the house, and, feeling certain that all the men were assembled in that one room, Inspector Carter continued his descent to the ground floor.

With drawn gun in his hand, he moved silently to the door of the room in which the men were gathered, and pressed his ear against the panels.

As he did so he stiffened, and a glint of triumph leapt into his eyes. For quite plainly he could hear the voice of Dr. Diluski saying:

"I intend to have the truth out of you, Kenyon. You've got the Mole hidden somewhere. It will be surfacing in order to pick you up. You are going to tell me where, and at what time."

"I will tell you nothing!" came the defiant voice of Kenyon. "If I hadn't been a fool I would have shot you dead when I met you on the moors this morning!"

"Fool you call yourself!" snarled the other, and now the inspector had no doubt at all that this was Zworge. "You'll call yourself worse than that before I'm through with you! Do you know what I'm going to do to you?"

"Torture me, I suppose!"

“Yes, torture you!” shouted Zworge. “Torture you like you tried to torture me that night at Hangman’s Hall, when you tried to force from me a confession of your innocence!”

“And I’ll have that confession yet, Zworge!” came the steady voice of Kenyon.

“You’re mad!” snarled Zworge. “Mad to think you’ll ever get out of here alive, let alone get out with a confession. You’ve had your chance, Kenyon. I’ve given you two chances to join me, and you refused each time. Well, you won’t get a third. But none will know that you’ve died. The earth crawler—my earth crawler—will still carry out raids, and the whole country will say that it’s you who are doing it!”

His voice rose to a frenzied shout:

“Look at that raid on the London-Continental Airport and the raid on the Houses of Parliament. Who’s got the blame of that? You have, you fool! By fury! I’m glad you didn’t join me. You’re more useful to me as my enemy, because none knows that there are two earth crawlers in existence, and you get blamed for every raid I carry out!”

He went off then into peal upon peal of devilish laughter, which made even the hardened Inspector Carter shudder at the mad brutality of the man.

The inspector was thinking swiftly. What was he to do? It would be suicide to tackle a room full of Zworge’s gangsters, yet he could not leave Kenyon in the villain’s clutches.

For the inspector was absolutely convinced at last that all Kenyon had told him was true. He was satisfied that Zworge had faked the evidence which had sent Kenyon to the dock on a charge of selling the plans of the Mole, and that the outlaw was completely innocent.

And, as if to make assurance doubly sure, there came the snarling voice of Zworge:

“When I first approached you, Kenyon, and offered to buy the plans of the Mole, you turned me down. And see where it has landed you. You’re ruined, disgraced! And now you’re going to die—not quickly, but slowly and horribly. And for a start I’m going to smash your fingers to pulp with the butt of this gun. Bring him here, Rafe!”

Inside the room, Kenyon was being dragged to a table. Two of the gangsters forced his hands on top of it, while Zworge gripped the barrel of his gun.

So intent were the crooks on watching the torture of their victim that they did not hear the door open, did not see the shadowy figure on the wall. But next moment:

“Up with your hands!” rasped a voice, and Inspector Carter sprang into the room, a gun held unwaveringly in his hand.

Zworge was leaning across a table with gun upraised, ready to bring the butt smashing down on Kenyon’s hands which were being held on the table by two powerful gangsters.

Rafe and the rest of the men in the room, including the hideous dwarf Yaki, were standing as though frozen, their faces turned towards the inspector.

For a moment not a man moved, then the inspector’s voice rasped harshly through the stillness:

“Put your hands up—every one of you!”

It was Yaki who acted, moving with incredible swiftness. One of his long, gorilla-like arms swept a heavy brass candlestick from the mantelpiece and hurled it at the inspector’s head with unerring aim.

The man from Scotland Yard leaped aside, and simultaneously his gun roared into life. A man lurched forward, crashed to the floor; then the gangsters' guns were out.

"Don't kill him!" screamed Zworge, his face livid with rage. "I want him alive!"

Bullets from the gangsters' guns whistled past the inspector's head. One seared his scalp like white-hot metal, another tore his gun from his hand, sending it clattering to the floor, whilst a third sent him reeling back, gasping with the agony of a shattered shoulder. Obeying Zworge's screamed order, the gangsters were not shooting to kill.

One queer fact impressed itself on Inspector Carter's consciousness amidst the inferno of roaring guns.

It was that the bullets whistling past him were not splintering through the woodwork of the doorway, but were whanging into it with a metallic sound which told him that the door was constructed not of wood but of steel.

This house was just another steel fortress as Hangman's Hall had been, and could in all probability be electrified in the same manner as Zworge's former stronghold.

With a sudden rush the gangsters were on the inspector, and in spite of his desperate struggles he was borne down by sheer weight of numbers.

His hands were jerked behind his back, steel handcuffs taken from his own pocket snapped shut on his wrists, and, panting and dishevelled, he was thrust forward to the table, across which he faced the smiling Zworge.

"So," said Zworge, "you changed into a sergeant's uniform and remained behind, did you, inspector?"

"Yes; and I've found you at last!" grated the inspector. "Your game is just about up, Zworge!"

"Don't try to bluff me!" returned Zworge evenly. "I suppose you think that when you fail to turn up, your men will come here looking for you. Well, let them. They will find nothing. I will be the same courteous Dr. Diluski as you met this morning, and I will be grieved that I cannot throw any light at all upon your mysterious disappearance!"

He looked hard at the inspector.

"I wonder how long you were listening outside that door?" he went on. "I wonder what you heard?"

"Never mind what I heard!" snapped the inspector. "I'm telling you nothing!"

"No?" purred Zworge. "Then let me tell you something. Your fate will be the same as Kenyon's. You will suffer torture until you scream for mercy. But no mercy will be shown you. The pair of you have hounded me long enough, and now you are going to pay!"

He turned to his men.

"Take them away!" he said.

In the midst of the gang Kenyon and Inspector Carter were hustled from the room and along the passageway which led to the kitchen and the rear premises.

Their guards thrust them down the dark stone steps which led into the cellar, and the secret switch was pressed. The square of flooring slid back, giving access to the dungeons, and it was into the largest of them all that Kenyon and his fellow-prisoner were dropped.

Bound and handcuffed as they were, they fell heavily, then the gangsters scrambled down an iron ladder, and, seizing them, proceeded to fetter them to the wall.

The fetters were those which had been used hundreds of years ago and were heavy and thickly rusted. But in spite of that they were more than efficient for the purpose in hand. Within a few minutes Kenyon and Carter were securely shackled to the wall, their wrists being fettered above their heads so that they were practically hanging against the wall, to which their ankles were also fastened.

“Well, I do not think either of you will escape me now,” said Zworge, pushing his way forward from the ladder which he had descended. “I shall deal with you in a moment, Kenyon. As for you, inspector, you can take that to be going on with!”

He smashed his fist savagely into Inspector Carter’s face. There was every atom of his strength behind the blow, and it crashed the inspector’s head back against the wall, sending him limp and unconscious in his bonds.

“You brute!” grated Kenyon. “You’ll pay for this, Zworge!”

“Indeed!” laughed Zworge, and struck the outlaw savagely across the face with his flat hand. “You don’t seem to realise even yet that you are in my power. Where is Yaki?”

“Here, master!” exclaimed the dwarf, scuttling down the iron ladder like some gigantic and hideous crab.

“You have the implements?”

“Yes, master!”

“Then go ahead!” said Zworge, and turned again to Kenyon. “I am permitting Yaki to introduce you to an old-fashioned Mongolian torture,” he said suavely. “Yaki tells me that his ancestors used to practise it quite a lot on all prisoners who fell into their hands!”

Kenyon made no reply. He was staring at the things which the dwarf was setting down on the top of an upturned barrel.

One was an ordinary pan such as is used for cooking, another was a small spirit lamp, burning with an evil blue flame, and the third was a cage containing two rats.

Kenyon felt his blood run cold. What did that misshapen devil plan to do to him?

He was soon to know, for, watched by Zworge and his gangsters, Yaki stepped forward and tore off Kenyon’s jacket and shirt, leaving him stripped to the waist.

Inspector Carter saw nothing of this. He was still hanging limp and unconscious in his fetters.

Taking a leather belt from about his waist, the dwarf strapped the pan to Kenyon’s bare torso, so that the rim of the pan was pressing tightly against the skin.

That done, he retraced his shuffling steps to the rat-trap and drew out one of the rodents. Then, with a leer on his hideous face, he approached Kenyon, squeezed the rat into the pan, and withdrew his hand, leaving the rodent imprisoned.

As he looked at the burning spirit lamp some glimmering of the truth dawned on Kenyon, and he fell to struggling madly in his fetters.

Taking the second rat from the trap, the dwarf approached him again. But there was a sudden interruption in the ghastly proceedings, for Rafe came clattering down the iron ladder, his face tense with excitement.

“There’s a boy asking to see you!” he burst out at Zworge. “He says his name is Jock Davey and that he’s escaped from the Mole. He’s the boy we read about in the newspapers—the kid who was carried off aboard the Mole when Kenyon escaped from the soldiers in

the Cheviot Hills!”

Zworge grabbed Rafe by the arm.

“Then the Mole’s surfaced?” he cried.

“Yes!” Rafe grinned. “She’s lying in the Burndale Plantation about two miles from here. And this kid says Crayshaw is a prisoner in the Mole!”

Zworge swung round and looked at Kenyon with glittering eyes.

“So!” he said triumphantly. “Not only have I captured you, my friend, but your Mole also is about to fall into my hands again!”

He wheeled again on Rafe.

“Bring that boy down here!” he ordered. “We’ve got something here that will interest him!”

He laughed malevolently, while Rafe went racing up the ladder.

Just what young Jock’s game was, Kenyon didn’t know. But that Bert and the youngster had some scheme on foot was evident, for Jock had known perfectly well that Gorse Grange was the headquarters of Zworge and his gangsters.

So, hanging there in his fetters, with the pan containing the rat strapped to him, he stared curiously at Jock, as that youngster was hustled down the ladder into the dungeon by the grinning Rafe, who held the lad tightly by the arm.

At sight of Kenyon and Inspector Carter shackled against the wall, Jock let out a wild cry and tried to wrench himself free.

“What’s this?” he cried, struggling desperately. “What are you doing? Who are you men?”

“My name is Zworge,” smiled the gangster. “You need have no fear. What we are doing to Kenyon and this gentleman from Scotland Yard we will not do to you—provided you answer our questions!”

“But I thought this was a private house!” yelled Jock, struggling frantically. “I know you villains. You’re just as bad as Kenyon, the whole lot of you!”

Zworge grinned.

“Come, stop that struggling!” he said. “It won’t help you at all. I understand you have escaped from the Mole? Where is it?”

“In Burndale Plantation, waiting for Kenyon!”

“Who is aboard her?”

“A man named Bert and a convict named Crayshaw!”

Zworge gestured to Rafe.

“Secure him to the wall!” he ordered.

In spite of his desperate efforts to tear himself free, Jock was securely fettered to the wall by the gangsters.

“You have been very useful to me, boy,” said Zworge, “and if it were possible I would grant you your life. But it isn’t possible, because if I let you go from here you would tell the police and the soldiers that it is my headquarters!”

“I wouldn’t!” cried Jock wildly. “I swear I wouldn’t!”

“Ah, but you would!” said Zworge. “In any case, it is a risk I cannot afford to take.

But I will promise you this. You will die swiftly and without much pain—that is, if you have told me the truth! If I find you have lied to me, then you will die just as painfully as Kenyon and Inspector Carter are going to die!”

He turned to Rafe.

“We attack the Mole at once,” he said. “We’ll leave here quietly in ones and twos, and converge on Burndale Plantation. We should be able to approach through the gorse without being seen.”

“And what about these three!” demanded Rafe, indicating Kenyon, Jock, and the still unconscious inspector.

“They can remain here until we return,” said Zworge. “Yaki will look after them—and no doubt provide them with plenty of amusement!”

The gangsters followed Zworge up the ladder, leaving the prisoners alone with their hideous gaoler.

Kenyon was struggling desperately to free his shackled hands. The stonework into which the staples of the rusty fetters were set was worn and corroded through the dampness of hundreds of years, and Kenyon felt that the staple holding the fetter of his right wrist was yielding slightly. He pulled and tugged at it with every atom of his strength.

All the misshapen dwarf saw, however, was the prisoner struggling frantically and futilely to free himself from his fetters. Now, having squeezed the second rat into the pan, Yaki picked up the spirit lamp and held the blue flame against the pan.

“You see what will happen!” he said, leering up at the outlaw. “When the pan begins to get hot the rats will try to gnaw their way out. But there is no way out—except into your flesh!”

Jock groaned and shuddered, and Kenyon struggled more frantically than ever. The staple was loosening. He could feel it beginning to give. But would he be in time?

Already the pan was becoming very hot, and he could feel the two hungry, maddened rats inside tearing, biting and snarling as they fought to get out.

Yaki was crouched in front of him, holding the lamp against the pan and looking up now and again to leer cruelly into Kenyon’s face.

The outlaw redoubled his efforts, fighting with the mad strength of despair to tear the staple loose as he felt yellow fangs begin to bite savagely into his flesh.

The staple came out!

Kenyon’s right arm was free except for the rusty iron fetter fixed like a bracelet around his wrist. He glanced down at the hideous, crouching dwarf.

The creature’s great head was bent over the pan, showing an expanse of dirty neck. Kenyon braced himself, then brought his right arm smashing downwards with every atom of his last despairing strength.

The blow took the dwarf right at the base of the skull, and, with a low moan, he collapsed to the floor, the lamp falling from his nerveless hand.

Frenziedly Kenyon tore the pan from his body, sending it clattering to the floor. The two maddened rats leaped out, and, with shrill squeals, rushed away into the far shadows of the dungeon.

Now Kenyon struggled frantically to loosen the staple of the fetter on his left wrist, throwing his whole weight upon it, and hurling himself from left to right.

Every moment was precious, for they had to get out of Gorse Grange before Zworge returned, and Kenyon gave a sudden gasp of relief as the staple came out of the old and corroded stonework.

But his ankles were still fettered, and, stooping, he seized the body of the dwarf. He tore the bunch of keys from the man's girdle, and, with shaking fingers, selected first one and then another before he found the key which unlocked the ankle fetters.

A few moments later he was free, and, having freed Jock, he struggled into his shirt and jacket.

"Where's the Mole?" he gasped, working frantically to unlock the fetters of Inspector Carter, who was showing signs of coming round.

"In Hollingford Wood," replied Jock shakily. "I'll explain everything later. It was Bert's idea—we were anxious about you. I sent Zworge and his men on a wild-geese chase!"

"And they'll be back here any moment!" rasped Kenyon. "Come on, give me a hand with this fellow. We can't leave him here to be killed by Zworge!"

Aided by Jock, they got the inspector up the iron ladder and out of the dungeon.

"What are we going to do with him?" demanded Jock.

"Get him away from the house and dump him somewhere," said Kenyon. "It won't be long before he comes round, then he'll be able to look after himself!"

But as they reached the front door, supporting the inspector between them, Kenyon halted, staring at a party of uniformed police, visible beyond the wall surrounding the grounds of the Grange.

"They're coming here!" said Kenyon sharply. "If we leave the grounds we'll be seen. We daren't hide in the house, either, for they're sure to search it. It'll be the inspector that they're looking for. We've got to hide in the grounds!"

"And leave the inspector here—eh?" said Jock.

"Yes, come on, let's get under cover!" snapped Kenyon. "They've probably seen us, as it is, but the wall will hide our movements!"

CHAPTER XVII

ZWORGE'S MOVE

"How do you think Zworge will like this?" asked Jock, as he and Kenyon plunged through the bushes into the farthest recesses of the thickly wooded grounds. "I wonder what he'll say when he returns to find the house in the possession of the police!"

"He'll not get away with it so easily as he did last time!" replied Kenyon grimly. "But tell me what happened to bring you here to the Grange."

"Well, it was like this," said Jock. "After we went under at dawn, leaving you to spy out the land around the Grange, Bert got worried. He couldn't rest. He saw that Zworge was such a clever fiend he might nab you somehow. Anyway, to cut a long story short, we decided that we would surface in Hollingford Wood, and that I should turn up at the Grange and pretend I was on tramp!"

"But you didn't pretend you were on tramp!" said Kenyon. "You told Zworge that you had escaped from the Mole!"

"I know I did," grinned Jock; "but that was when I was certain you'd been caught. You see, I couldn't see any sign of you around the Grange, and when I stood talking in the doorway to that fellow Rafe, I smelt burnt powder, and there had been a considerable amount of shooting going on, by the look of it—or, rather, by the smell of it—so I decided to get inside somehow and find out what had happened!"

"So you spun that yarn about escaping from the Mole!" said Kenyon appreciatively. "That was pretty smart of you!"

"Well, it was the only way to get in," said Jock. "I knew they'd be interested, but, my hat——"

He broke off as Kenyon's hand closed on his arm.

"There's the police!" said Kenyon, peering through the bushes. "If they start searching the grounds we are done, Jock!"

"But it's what they will do, isn't it?" demanded Jock.

"I'm afraid so!" said Kenyon grimly. "Our only hope is for Zworge to turn up before they've finished searching the house. He'll give them something else to think about than searching the grounds. Hallo, they've found the inspector!"

Crouched in cover, he and Jock watched as the policemen gathered round the still semi-conscious form of Inspector Carter, whom Kenyon had dumped just outside the front door.

There was a brief and excited discussion, then the main body of police, rushed into the house, whilst the others quickly surrounded it.

"I wonder what they'll say when they find those dungeons," said Jock.

That was exactly what Zworge was wondering. Lying behind a clump of gorse a quarter of a mile away across the moors, he and his gangsters were staring with dismayed eyes at the entry of the police to Gorse Grange.

"We might have known it!" growled Rafe. "They're looking for that cursed inspector!"

He must have told them that if he didn't report within a certain time they were to come and look for him. You've taken a chance too many this time, Zworge!"

"Yes; and what about the Mole being in Burndale Plantation?" sneered Kolmann. "A nice mess we've made of things. Taken in by a kid like that! I bet you don't even know what his game was, Zworge?"

"No; but I'd soon find out if we were going back to the house!" snarled Zworge. "He can't rescue Kenyon, anyway, because I left the lot of them fettered. They'll be blown to smithereens along with the police!"

"Are you going to do it?" demanded Rafe.

"Yes, I'm going to do it!" grated Zworge. "The game's up as far as Gorse Grange is concerned. The police will know by this time that Zworge and Dr. Diluski are one and the same man. Well, the skunks will never live to profit by that knowledge!"

Rising to his feet, he turned and ran swiftly towards a boulder about a hundred yards away. His men followed him, and, reaching the boulder, they helped Zworge to swing it aside.

In the cavity disclosed was a small wooden box fitted with a plunger, and another box containing a telephone receiver.

"I don't know what they're doing in the house at the moment," said Zworge, placing his hand on the plunger, "but they're due for a nasty shock!"

With that he pressed the plunger. Simultaneously there came a dull, reverberating roar, and Gorse Grange dissolved in a billowing cloud of smoke and a terrific shower of flying debris and mortar.

At least, that is what it looked like to Zworge and his men. But to Kenyon and Jock, crouched behind the distant bushes of the grounds, the sudden roar was appalling and deafening.

It came without any warning. Just a sudden, reverberating thunder which almost burst their ear drums, and the walls of Gorse Grange caved outwards, the roof disrupted in a flying shower of red tiles and flaming rafters, then all about the man and the boy thudded stones and beams from the house which Zworge had blown up.

One huge rafter crashed on its end just beside Jock, and before the boy could move it toppled over on top of him, pinning the lad to the ground.

Even yet they could scarcely comprehend what had happened. All they knew was that, without the slightest warning, Gorse Grange had blown up, and there wasn't the slightest doubt that every man in the ill-fated building had been killed almost instantaneously.

"I think we can put it down to Zworge," replied Kenyon grimly, as he pulled the beam from off the boy. "He's like a fox. He always has two outlets to his burrows. He'd see the police enter the house, and he's blown them up. But, thank goodness, you're not hurt, so we had better get out of this before those tanks come."

"Do you think he has somewhere he can go where he can lie low?" asked Jock, as they ran on.

"I don't know," replied Kenyon. "But Crayshaw will know. We'll get it out of Crayshaw!"

"Good old Crayshaw!" murmured Jock. "I bet he hates you for rescuing him from

Bleakmoor Prison.”

Kenyon laughed.

“That’s Hollingford Wood right ahead, isn’t it?” he said. “By Jove, we’re just in time! Look!”

Jock looked in the direction of Kenyon’s outflung arm, and saw a score of fast whippet tanks coming careering over the moors from the direction of Garthdale.

They were heading towards the smoking ruins of Gorse Grange, and travelling as fast as their powerful motors could drive them over the sloping and uneven going.

“If Zworge hasn’t got his earth crawler handy, I’m afraid he and his gang will be rounded up,” said Kenyon, as he and Jock gained the fringe of the wood. “And if Zworge’s arrested before I get my confession out of him, then I’m afraid I’m done, so we’re going to get into the Mole and look for Zworge. I must know whether he is taken or not, and there’s a chance that we’ll be able to grab him before the tanks do.”

“But won’t those tanks be effective against the Mole?” demanded Jock, as he and Kenyon plunged into the wood towards where the Mole was waiting, hidden in the dense underbrush and foliage of the leafy bushes. “I mean, couldn’t they disable her?”

“At short range with their guns, they could,” admitted Kenyon. “A few shells striking her at close quarters would put her out of action. But we’ve got to risk that. We must see what happens to Zworge!”

What was happening to Zworge at that moment was that he had picked up the telephone receiver from the cavity under the boulder, and was in frantic communication with his earth crawler, which was lying hidden six hundred feet underground in charge of four mechanics.

Zworge had sighted the tanks converging swiftly on the burning remnant of what had once been Gorse Grange, and he knew that his only hope of escape lay in getting aboard his earth crawler.

It would be hopeless to make a bolt for it. The whole moors would be scoured for suspects, and the moment he and his men started running the hunt would be on.

The trouble was the boulder was in an exposed position, and Zworge and his men grouped about it could be plainly seen from the burning ruins.

Every moment was precious, for the foremost tanks had already reached the ruins, and it was in a frenzy of rage and despair that Zworge bawled orders through the telephone to the head mechanic in charge of the earth crawler.

“What?” he raved. “What d’you say? You’ve been fixing fresh batteries, and you’re not through with the job yet? Good heavens, can’t you start her? You can’t? Then we’re done—we’re done!”

His face ashen, Zworge turned to Rafe.

“They can’t start her!” he cried hoarsely. “They’ve been fixing fresh batteries, and they’re only half-way through with the job. What the blazes are we to do?”

“They’ve got to start her!” rasped Rafe. “Look, those tanks are already at the Grange. The moment they find out what’s happened they’ll be wirelessly for a cordon to be thrown round the moors, and they’ll start hunting for us themselves!”

“Yes, and they’ll find us!” snarled Zworge. “By fury, we’ve got to have the earth

crawler started!”

He turned again to the telephone.

“You, Kurz,” he snarled to the head mechanic, who, six hundred feet below the ground in the hull of the earth crawler, was working desperately on the batteries, earphones fixed in place on his head, “how long will you want before you can bring up to the surface?”

“Another six minutes before we can move her,” answered Kurz, gesturing desperately to his men to make all haste possible in the fixing of the batteries. “Can you hang on?”

“No, we can’t!” snarled Zworge. “You’ve got to get up here in six minutes, Kurz. Three minutes for you to move her, and three minutes to get her to the surface. If you delay longer we’ll be taken. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” replied Kurz. “You can rely on me to do my best.”

Yes, that was all Zworge could do, and he knew it. If Kurz failed to get the earth crawler up to the surface within the next few minutes, then Zworge and his gangsters would either be taken, or would be mercilessly shot down as they resisted arrest.

The officers were getting back into their tanks, and, as Zworge and his men watched, they saw the foremost tanks swing their blunt noses in their direction and come careering over the moors towards them.

Snatching up the telephone receiver, Zworge pressed his livid lips to the mouthpiece.

“Are you there, Kurz?” he cried desperately. “Can you hear me? What? You’re moving! Good man! Give her every bit of juice she’ll take. The tanks are heading towards us now.”

Throwing down the receiver he turned to Rafe, Kolmann, and the rest of the gangsters, who were waiting in tense and uneasy silence, their scared eyes on the approaching tanks.

“Kurz is on his way to the surface now!” he cried. “We’ve got a chance if he can get here before those tanks do. We’ve got to scatter. It’s every man for himself now. Scatter and the tanks’ll be unable to carry out concerted action. When you see the earth crawler surface, make a dash for it!”

Obediently the gangsters scattered, some running this way and some running that. No two men took the same direction, and the move obviously nonplussed the officers of the tanks who had been reckoning on racing up to the gang and demanding an explanation of their presence on the moors.

For the moment it seemed to the respective commanders of the tanks a somewhat futile thing to chase a single man with an armoured tank, but apparently it was the only thing to be done under the circumstances.

Yet here again arose a certain amount of confusion. More than one tank swung after the same gangster, then changed course again to chase some gangster who was not being pursued.

This certainly gave Zworge and his gang a few precious seconds’ respite, and each man knew that Kurz was driving the earth crawler to the surface as fast as her whirling blades and powerful motors could send her.

Rafe, fleeing desperately from a tank which was purring swiftly towards him, looked over his shoulder, then doubled like a rabbit. But these tanks were the last word in modern

mechanism, and the whippet swung round with the agility of the animal after which it was named and rapidly closed in on the wildly-running Rafe.

A look-out port in the tank slid open and a young officer poked out his head.

“Hi, you!” he shouted. “Stand still and put your hands up!”

Rafe’s reply to that was to wheel and take a flying shot at the officer’s head. The bullet flattened itself within half an inch of its target and the officer withdrew his head with alacrity, then next instant a machine-gun rattled into life and a burst of bullets whistled past Rafe.

If there was anything which could be said in Rafe’s favour it is that the man was far removed from being a fool. He knew those machine-gun bullets were meant to warn him and not to kill, and that the next burst would smash through his back and finish him off once and for all.

So he stopped running, and turning, put up his hands. Near him was Zworge, also standing with his hands raised whilst a tank moved towards him, its wicked machine-gun muzzle covering the master-crook.

Not twenty paces separated Zworge and Rafe as they stood with hands elevated, waiting to be taken prisoners. They exchanged glances, for beneath their feet they could feel the ground trembling, and they knew that within the next few moments the earth crawler would burst through the surface.

The doors in the tanks slid back and the respective commanders appeared, each with a revolver in his hand. The one who approached Zworge was a grim-faced fellow and looked the sort of man who would stand no nonsense.

“Who the dickens are you?” he rasped. “And why didn’t you surrender when we called upon you to do so?”

“Why should we?” snarled Zworge, thanking his lucky stars—as he had thanked them before—that there was neither photograph nor description of him in circulation, for Zworge had always carried out his murderous and nefarious exploits heavily masked, and none except his own men and Kenyon had ever seen his face.

“We are going to take the whole lot of you to Garthdale for interrogation!” replied the officer harshly. “Gorse Grange has been blown up, and it is suspected that the Zworge and Kenyon gang were using it as their headquarters——”

Abruptly he broke off, for his legs were becoming accustomed to the firmness of the ground after the rumbling of the tank, and he could feel the earth trembling and quivering violently beneath his feet.

“What the devil’s happening here?” he shouted; then, as sudden realisation appeared to come to him, he whipped up his gun, levelling it straight at Zworge’s head.

“Get into that tank and be quick about it!” he shouted. “If you hesitate I will shoot you dead!”

Zworge didn’t hesitate. He could hear the whirring of the earth crawler’s motors, and the ground was shaking as though in the throes of an earthquake, and by that Zworge knew that within three seconds the earth crawler would burst through the surface.

So steadily he walked towards the tank, the officer keeping him covered with the revolver. But when within a pace of the tank, Zworge acted with amazing swiftness. He

hurled himself forward, dodging round the other side of the tank, and in that same instant the earth crawler burst out of the ground.

It did exactly what Zworge had expected it to do when he heard it approaching. Its whirling, conical nose struck the bottom of the tank with a terrific crash, hurling the whippet aside as though it were made of cardboard.

With another crash the tank overturned, and as the earth crawler heaved itself up from out the bowels of the earth, Zworge leaped for the door, which was already sliding open in its hull.

So did Rafe, but he wasn't so lucky. The young officer who had been ordering him into his tank fired the instant Rafe made his dash for the earth crawler.

The bullet took Zworge's second-in-command full between the shoulder blades, and with a choking, gurgling cry Rafe crashed to the ground.

The other officer, appalled by the disaster which had happened to his own tank, pulled himself together and leaped towards the earth crawler.

But Zworge was already inside, with the door sliding shut behind him, and yelling for the motors to be started.

"But what about the others?" gulped Kurz. "Aren't we going to pick up the others?"

"No, we're not!" shouted Zworge, his green eyes blazing with maniacal rage. "I told them it was every man for himself, and that goes. I'm in here—I'm safe—and that's all that matters. Start those motors up, you fool, and take her under before the tanks open fire on us with their heavy guns!"

Kurz hesitated. Rogue that he was, he could not easily abandon his comrades in this cruel, cold-blooded fashion.

"By thunder! If I wasn't short-handed I'd shoot you dead!" snarled Zworge, leaping for the control seat and whipping across the motor switch. "If you attempt to open that door I will shoot you!"

The mechanics and the white-faced Kurz said nothing. They knew the demoniacal rage of which Zworge was capable, and they knew he would not hesitate to keep his word should they attempt to defy him any further.

The whole episode from the first appearance of the earth crawler had taken but seconds, and outside Kolmann was battering frantically on the closed door of the hull with his bare fists.

"Let me in!" he shrieked. "Zworge, you dirty double-crossing hound, let me in!"

Another man joined him, beating despairingly on the closed steel door which stood between them and safety.

"Zworge, you rotten skunk, let us in!" he screamed. "Zworge, can you hear us, curse you?"

But Zworge didn't hear them nor would he have cared. He had already jerked the motor switch across and gave the earth crawler all the power she had in her batteries. Under the pull of her powerful gyro-motor, the earth crawler dropped her nose in order to burrow her way down into the bowels of the earth.

As she did so Kolmann flung himself flat on his face. He was not an instant too soon, for the swiftly manœuvring tanks had brought their guns to bear on the earth crawler and

there came the sudden crash of guns and the scream of high-explosive shells.

Two shells struck the whirling blades, buckling them like paper, and causing the earth crawler to reel drunkenly. But the earth crawler was constructed of the hardest compound of steel known to man, and the shells failed to penetrate the hull.

They might have cracked the hull had not the whirling blades broken the full shock of impact, and before the guns could fire again the earth crawler was already digging swiftly into the ground.

Another shell struck her as her stern disappeared, but the metal at both bow and stern was of triple thickness for boring purposes, and the high-explosive did little more than dent the rear of the hull.

Next moment the earth crawler had vanished from view, and, getting to his feet, Kolmann raised his hands above his head and walked towards the nearest tank.

“I suppose you’ve realised by now that that was Zworge,” he said grimly to the senior officer. “I would like to make a statement.”

“You will have every opportunity of making a statement!” the officer assured him frigidly.

“It concerns Robert Kenyon, who commands the Mole,” said Kolmann. “I think every one of us whom you have taken prisoner will sign it. We’re not the only ones Zworge has double-crossed. He double-crossed Kenyon——”

Abruptly he broke off, staring across the moors towards Hollingford Wood.

“There’s the Mole!” he said, with a short laugh. “None of you have ever known until now that there are two earth crawlers, have you?”

The officer and tank corps men wheeled. In the excitement of the past few minutes they had had no eyes for anything but the scene going on around them.

But now they stared in astonishment at a second earth crawler which was commencing to burrow its way underground in the neighbourhood of Hollingford Wood.

“Yes, that’s Kenyon!” repeated Kolmann. “And he is on the trail of Zworge—he’s going to hunt him underground!”

CHAPTER XVIII

DEATH IN THE DEPTHS

“WHERE are we going?” asked Kurz, when they reached the depth of two thousand feet under the ground and Zworge drove the crawler on through the bowels of the earth.

“We’re going to the only place I know where we’ll be safe!” grated Zworge. “And that’s the lake. I suggest one last raid which will make us rich for life. We will carry it out and then disperse.”

It was upwards of an hour later that, having bored its way through solid rock for mile upon mile, the earth crawler suddenly emerged on the rocky shores of a vast underground lake.

In the glare of her wonderful searchlights inky black water stretched as far as the eye could see. What the area of this great expanse of water was, neither Zworge nor his crew had ever discovered, for they had not had the time to explore it properly.

They had discovered it when the earth crawler was out on trial, and during the brief quarter of an hour they had spent there they had made two important discoveries. One was that a belt of hot air lay over this mysterious stretch of water, and the other was that although the water was warm it was drinkable.

So air and water made the shores of the lake a sanctuary for the earth crawler and her crew when all else failed, and, bringing the massive steel monster to a stop, Zworge switched off the motors and rose stiffly to his feet.

Pressing the switch which operated the door in the hull, he stepped outside. Leaning against the outer casing, he stared with sombre eyes out across the black expanse of water over which the powerful beams of the earth crawler’s searchlights were casting twin paths of pure gold.

So this was the end. His loot had gone and his men had gone. Out of all his gang there remained to him only Kurz and the other two mechanics.

As he stood there staring out over the dark, still waters of that strange underground sea set deep in the bowels of the earth, there was one thought which afforded the master-crook the liveliest satisfaction.

It was the thought that in the end he had triumphed over Kenyon. He had left Kenyon and Inspector Carter fettered to the wall of the dungeon, and it was beneath the dungeons that the high-explosive had been stored in readiness for the day when it might be necessary to blow Gorse Grange out of existence.

Zworge stirred and straightened up as a step sounded near him. Turning, he found himself face to face with Kurz.

“What are we going to do?” demanded Kurz.

“I will tell you,” replied Zworge. “We are going to raid the Bank of England’s vaults in London. We will smash into the vaults, take every piece of gold and bullion we can lay our hands on, then clear off and never be heard of again. But we must be fresh for the job, and I myself intend to turn in. I advise you to do the same, but see that I am wakened in

four hours' time, and have a meal ready for me!"

Entering the hull of the earth crawler, he sought one of the curtained sleeping compartments. Divesting himself of his boots and jacket only, he flung himself down on the bunk, and within a few minutes was sleeping the sleep of sheer exhaustion.

"I wish I'd his nerve," said Kurz, when Zworge had retired. "He's after the bullion of the Bank of England now. And the way he can sleep down here! I couldn't sleep down here. The place gives me the creeps!"

"You talk as though there was something down here!" jeered another mechanic, a fellow named Glitten. "Come on, let's have a look round while Zworge's asleep!"

Leaving Haines, the third of the mechanics, aboard the earth crawler, Kurz and Glitten stepped out through the open doorway on to the smooth and solid lava rock.

"This stuff's volcanic," said Kurz. "It wouldn't surprise me if at times that water gets to boiling point. There're air vents as well, otherwise there'd be no oxygen down here."

"It's a queer place altogether," said Glitten, as he and Kurz set off slowly and carefully along the rocky shores of the vast underground lake. "But what a grand place for a headquarters. Far better than Hangman's Hall and Gorse Grange. If only Zworge had transferred his headquarters here, we'd have been safe from Kenyon and the police."

He broke off as, halting abruptly, Kurz grabbed him by the arm.

"What the devil's wrong with you, Kurz?" he demanded testily.

"Look!" exclaimed Kurz, his fingers pressing tightly into Glitten's arm. "That boulder there. D'you see it? It moved!"

Glitten laughed scornfully.

"You're seeing things!" he declared. "How the devil could it move? Let's have a look!"

Releasing his arm from Kurz's grip, Glitten moved forward towards the huge, oval boulder. There was, he admitted, something peculiar about its shape. It was so smooth and uniform in outline. It looked just like some monster and nightmarish crab crouched there on the lava rock.

When within a dozen paces of the boulder Glitten halted, conscious of a strange stirring at his scalp.

For the thing was moving—uncurling itself in terrifying fashion, hoisting itself up on gigantic legs, which looked like mighty, curved pillars.

With a shout of terror Glitten turned to flee. As he did so the nightmarish monster lumbered into action, following him at a horrible ungainly run.

The thing was a crab, if such a monster could be so termed. Kurz saw that as he turned and dashed madly for the earth crawler.

Then suddenly he heard a shriek—a deathly scream of sheer terror. Gaining the crawler, he steadied himself against the hull and looked round.

The monster of the lake had thrust out a gigantic nipper and seized Glitten, and, with a shriek of sheer panic, Kurz hurled himself at the steel door in the hull and hammered on it with the butt of his gun.

It slid back immediately as Haines pressed the switch which controlled it, and Kurz blundered into the hull, to collapse, weak and panting, on to the control seat.

“What’s the matter?” gasped Haines, staring at him. “What has happened?”

“It’s Glitten!” panted Kurz. “There’s something out there got and killed him. Rouse Zworge!”

Haines ran to the look-out port, took one horrified stare at the monster crab, which was crouched over its prey, then turned and raced for the sleeping compartment, in order to rouse Zworge.

The master-crook appeared within a few moments, and before Kurz had got half his dreadful story gulped out, Zworge was at the look-out port, staring out at the giant horror of that underground lake.

As he stared at the huge creature a peculiar glint crept into Zworge’s eyes, and something approaching a smile hovered over his lips.

He turned to Kurz.

“Glitten is not dead!” he said tersely. “I can see him moving! No, there’s no need for you to look. We haven’t time. We must get him away from that brute. Is your gun loaded? And yours, Haines? Come on, then. Perhaps a volley of bullets will drive the monster off!”

“More like bring it rushing at us!” said Kurz shakily. “You’re wrong about Glitten. He is dead!”

“I tell you he is not dead!” cried Zworge harshly. “We are short-handed enough, as it is. We must make an effort to save him. Open the door, Haines!”

Nervously Haines pressed the switch which controlled the sliding door in the hull. The door moved smoothly and silently back, and Zworge stepped towards it.

“Fire straight at the brute’s head!” he ordered, when Kurz and Haines had joined him. “If we all fire at once we ought to finish him off completely. Are you ready?”

“Yes,” muttered Kurz and Haines, taking careful aim at the monster crouched over its mangled prey, some thirty paces away.

“Then—fire!” rapped Zworge.

The guns of Kurz and Haines roared into life, lurid flame splitting the darkness in the black shadow of the earth crawler.

The monster recoiled, reared itself up on its great, curved legs, took a lumbering forward run, then collapsed, a threshing, writhing heap, which suddenly became still.

“Got him!” yelled Kurz triumphantly. “We’ve about blown his head off——”

The words died on his lips and he seized Haines by the arm.

“Where’s Zworge?” he panted.

Haines wheeled, glaring in open-mouthed astonishment at the door of the earth crawler. It had slid shut, and there was no sign of Zworge.

“He’s inside!” gasped Kurz, a dreadful fear laying a cold grip on his heart. “Good heavens, Haines, surely he’s not trying to double-cross us like he double-crossed the others?”

Leaping to the door he beat madly on it with the butt of his gun.

“Zworge!” he screamed. “Zworge, you hound, open this door!”

One of the look-out ports slid open the fraction of an inch—not far enough to permit

of a bullet to enter—and to the ears of Kurz and Haines came the purring voice of Zworge:

“I do not intend to share the loot of my final raid with anyone, yet I had some compunction about shooting the pair of you dead. You may find a way up to the surface of the earth from here. I doubt it, but it is the one chance of life left to you, I’m afraid!”

And with that the port slid shut.

CHAPTER XIX

CRAYSHAW TALKS

WHEN KENYON went underground near Hollingford Wood after witnessing Zworge's escape from the tanks, the first thing he did was to turn his attention to the convict Crayshaw, whom he had taken from Bleakmoor Prison.

"Now, Crayshaw," he said grimly, "being at one time a member of Zworge's gang you'll no doubt know where his emergency retreat is situated?"

"What d'you mean, his emergency retreat?" growled Crayshaw, who was lying trussed and bound on the steel floor-plates of the Mole.

"You know perfectly well what I mean," replied Kenyon pleasantly. "When he was driven from Hangman's Hall he made for Gorse Grange. Well, now he's been driven from Gorse Grange where is he likely to make for?"

"I don't know," growled Crayshaw.

"Then we'll have to see if we can assist your memory," said Kenyon. "Get the iron pot again. Jock, and shove it on the electric brazier."

Crayshaw scowled, and Bert grinned. Crayshaw had had a dose of that iron pot before. It was filled with molten lead, and Mr. Crayshaw had narrowly escaped having his bare foot thrust into it.

"You should realise, by this time," said Kenyon pleasantly, "that I never say what I don't mean. If you can't remember where Zworge is likely to make for, then I'm afraid it's going to be very unhealthy for you."

Crayshaw, not being a complete fool, recognised the grim earnestness in Kenyon's voice. Last time he had been interrogated by Kenyon he had escaped from the torture of the molten lead by giving in at the last moment.

"Look here," he burst out hoarsely, "I tell you I don't know where Zworge will make for. But I do know where he might make for, and that's all I can tell you!"

"Well, that's something at any rate," observed Kenyon, with a smile. "It won't be hard to find out if you're lying, and if you are, you know what the consequences will be!"

"I'm not lying, I tell you," shouted Crayshaw furiously. "All I know about Zworge's movements now is that, in my opinion, he'll make for the lake!"

"The lake?" repeated Kenyon, questioningly.

"Yes, the lake!" replied Crayshaw. "When we took the earth crawler out on trials we found a great underground lake, more like a sea than a lake, and Zworge said then that if ever we were pressed it would make a good place in which to lie hidden until the hue and cry had died down!"

"But I don't understand," said Kenyon. "Is this lake very far under the ground?"

"Two thousand feet!"

"Then there's no air down there, so it couldn't be used as a hide-out," began Kenyon. "You can't come that stuff with us, Crayshaw——"

"I'm not trying to come anything with you!" cut in Crayshaw snarlingly. "I'm telling

you what I know, that's all. You say there'll be no air at two thousand feet down. Well, that's where you're wrong then, mister. It's very hot down there, but there's oxygen in the atmosphere and it's breathable. The water of the lake can be used for drinking as well. That's why Zworge said it would make a suitable hide-out!"

Kenyon and Bert exchanged glances. In the cruises aboard the Mole, they had seen enough of the wonders of underground rivers, caverns, and valleys, to be really surprised at nothing, and it was quite possible that there was some truth in this queer story of Crayshaw's.

More than possible, in fact, for Kenyon was quite convinced that the man had neither the pluck to lie nor Zworge's interest sufficiently at heart to do so.

"Can you show us on the map just whereabouts this lake is situated?" he demanded.

"Yes, as near as makes no difference, I can," assented Crayshaw. "You may have to cruise about a bit to locate it, but I can show you within a mile or two exactly where it lies!"

"Right-ho!" nodded Kenyon crossing to the chart table. "Untie his wrists, Jock, but keep his ankles tied. We don't want him starting any rough stuff."

Sullenly Crayshaw showed Kenyon on the chart the location of the lake, stressing again the fact that he couldn't pin-point it exactly, and that they might have to cruise around before they found it.

"That's all right," said Kenyon, "if it's there we'll find it!"

Seating himself in the control seat he turned the whirling, conical nose of the Mole on the compass course he and Crayshaw had plotted on the chart and drove the earth crawler down to a depth of two thousand feet.

As for Crayshaw his bonds had been retied, and he was lying on the floor glowering at Kenyon's back.

"I'd like to know just what you intend to do with me!" he burst out suddenly.

"It all depends on yourself most probably," replied Kenyon, without turning his head from the gleaming dials and gauges of the instrument board. "If you pull your weight and don't give any trouble I might turn you loose and give you a chance to get out of the country. That'll be better than going back to Bleakmoor, won't it?"

"You bet it will," responded Crayshaw fervently, and for the first time since he had been Kenyon's prisoner some of the hostility faded from his sullen eyes.

For an hour or more the Mole drove on, burrowing its way through solid rock and stone.

"We should be somewhere near it now, Bert," said Kenyon suddenly. "I think we'll begin to cast around a bit!"

He swung the Mole off her course and commenced to circle in a wide radius, keeping the earth crawler at a depth of two thousand feet.

The searchlight beams had been switched on, and suddenly Kenyon gave a gasp of sheer astonishment and whipped the control lever into neutral, bringing the Mole to a stop.

Ahead of him, plainly visible in the brilliant golden beams of the searchlights, he could see through the look-out window a vast and silent sea of inky black water surrounded by smooth, black rocks.

“We’ve found it, Bert!” he gasped. “Open the ports and let’s smell the air—if it is air!”

Obediently Bert pressed the switch which controlled the ports, and as they slid back hot air drifted into the interior of the Mole.

“Well, was I right or wasn’t I?” demanded Crayshaw triumphantly.

“You were quite right,” said Kenyon, “but, unfortunately, I don’t see any sign at all of Zworge or any of his precious gangsters!”

“Perhaps we’d better ’ave a look round, guv’nor,” suggested Bert. “Sort of circle round these ’ere rocks. They seem to stretch farther’n we can see, and Zworge might be lurking here somewhere.”

“Yes, and he’ll have seen us if he is,” said Kenyon grimly. “Our searchlights will have given us away. However, that can’t be helped. It’s too late to switch them off now. We’ll have a look round, anyway!”

He flung over the switch to bring the caterpillar treads of the Mole into motion, then suddenly he stiffened in his seat, his head inclined in a listening attitude.

“What on earth is that?” he demanded.

There was a moment of tense silence inside the Mole. Then plainly to the ears of Kenyon and his companions came the sound of a feeble hammering on the outside of the hull.

“Jumpin’ jimmy!” gasped Crayshaw, in an awestruck voice. “There’s something out there—something what wants to come in.”

Kenyon rose from the control seat, and drew his revolver.

“Stand by, Bert, and you too, Jock!” he said. “We’ll see who it is that knocks on our hull, 2,000 feet down in the depths of the earth.”

With that he pressed the switch which controlled the door in the hull, and silently and smoothly the steel panel slid back.

Kenyon’s gun was raised, but his hand dropped to his side, and he stared in speechless astonishment at the figure which blundered wildly in through the open door of the hull.

It was the figure of a man, white-faced, whose clothes had been torn to ribbons, and whose limbs and body were cruelly lacerated.

“It’s Kurz!” gasped Crayshaw. “How in the name of all that’s wonderful did you get down here, Kurz?”

Kurz made no reply. He reeled, and would have fallen had not Bert caught him by the arm.

“’Ere, steady on!” exclaimed Bert encouragingly. “Wot’s wrong with you, mate?”

“Wrong?” repeated Kurz, with a shudder. “Wrong?”

His voice rose to a sudden startling scream:

“Shut that door—shut it, I tell you! There’s death out there!”

“Is Zworge out there?” demanded Crayshaw, as Kenyon pressed the switch which controlled the door, then stepped quickly to the medicine-chest with which the Mole was fitted.

Kurz made no attempt to answer Crayshaw’s question. Dreadful shudders were racking his frame, and, guided by Bert, he reached the control seat into which he slumped,

and buried his face in his hands.

“Here, drink this!” said Kenyon, holding a glass of brandy to the man’s twitching lips.

Eagerly Kurz seized the glass, and drank the raw spirit at a gulp. The fiery stuff seemed to put renewed life into him, for he looked up at Kenyon, and said hoarsely:

“Thank heavens you came!”

“What happened?” asked Kenyon quietly.

Kurz was silent a moment, and if ever murder flamed in a man’s eyes it flamed in his as he thought of what had happened.

“I don’t know whether you’ve guessed it or not,” he burst out, “but I was one of Zworge’s men!”

“I guessed it from Crayshaw’s remarks,” said Kenyon.

“Yes, of course,” gulped Kurz. “You’re Kenyon. Well, I don’t know whether it’ll be any consolation to you to know it, but you’re not the only one that Zworge has tricked and double-crossed. He’s done it to me, and to the whole of his gang.”

“What the devil d’you mean by that?” cried Crayshaw, starting up in his bonds.

“You shut your mouth!” snapped Bert. “What we want to know, Kurz, is Zworge down here anywhere?”

“He was, but he isn’t now,” said Kurz bitterly.

“Where is he?” demanded Kenyon.

“On his way to loot the vaults of the Bank of England,” replied Kurz. “I’ll tell you everything, because all I want to see now is that double-crossing skunk sent to the scaffold, and I don’t care if I go with him. It’ll be a pleasure to stand beside him and know he’s going to be hanged!”

“Well, let’s hear what happened,” said Kenyon.

Kurz told the outlaw everything. Kenyon, Bert, Jock, and Crayshaw listened intently as Kurz spoke of the journey of Zworge’s earth crawler to the underground lake.

Their expressions changed to ones of amazement as Kurz went on to describe the encounter he and Glitten had had with the monster crab, and Crayshaw cursed with rage as Kurz told how Zworge had tricked him and Haines into leaving the earth crawler.

“He told us through one of the ports,” continued Kurz, “that he wanted all the loot of this last raid of his for himself. He said he was abandoning us because he couldn’t bring himself to shoot us in cold blood. It would be better if he had shot us. Nobody will ever know what Haines and I went through out there after Zworge had cleared off in his earth crawler. And now Haines is dead—one of the monster crabs got him.”

Again he dropped his face in his hands, and great shudders racked his body.

“The dirty cur!” snarled Crayshaw. “So that was the way of it, was it? He started first on Kenyon, and finished up by double-crossing the whole gang. Well, this let’s you out all right, Kenyon, anyway.”

“What do you mean?” asked Kenyon.

“What do I mean?” repeated Crayshaw. “Gosh, I should have thought it was plain enough what I meant! Every man what’s been arrested, and Kurz and me as well, will swear on oath that you were innocent of the charges brought against you. The whole gang

know the truth, and as most of 'em will hang, they've nothing to gain by keeping anything back. No, the truth will come out at last, mister, and I'm only sorry I ever had a hand in it. Gosh, I might be rotten, but thank goodness I'm not so rotten as that dirty skunk, Zworge!"

"How long ago is it that Zworge left the lake?" demanded Kenyon.

"I don't know!" answered Kurz. "It cannot be long, I'm sure, but it's been like years and years to me. I can't tell you at all, but I reckon it must have been about half an hour ago. Are you going after him?"

"I should jolly well think I am going after him!" retorted Kenyon grimly. "And I'm going right now, if you'll get out of that control seat. The vaults of the Bank of England, you say? Right-ho! If we don't catch up with him before, we'll at least meet him there!"

He pulled the motor switch over, and the Mole drove on across the lava rocks, and a few moments later was burrowing her way through the earth in the direction of London.

CHAPTER XX

TRIUMPH!

ZWORGE'S raid on the vaults of the Bank of England was the act of a gambler who stakes everything on one last desperate throw of the dice.

Zworge knew that there was always a guard of soldiers mounted over the bank, and he knew that, while his earth crawler was at large, the guard had been trebled.

But that did not deter him. He was content to pin his faith to his earth crawler, his poison gas, and his own cool daring. Those three things combined would, he was convinced, still win him the colossal fortune which, in his crooked, murderous way, he had fought so hard to win.

He reached a spot directly below the vaults at ten minutes past one in the morning, and it was four and a half minutes later that he smashed up through the steel flooring. Therefore at exactly fourteen and a half minutes past one in the morning the alarm bells began to ring raucously throughout the entire building and in the City police stations to which the alarms were electrically attached.

But Zworge cared nothing for alarm bells. His poison gas would keep everyone at bay until he had got all the bullion he could handle safely aboard his crawler.

No sooner had the earth crawler come to rest on the floor of the vaults than he opened his gas ports out of which deadly streams of poison gas commenced to pour.

And there was this point about that poison gas. It attacked everything but rubber. It burned and blistered the skin, paralysed limbs, joints and muscles, and killed instantly if the slightest whiff of it was inhaled into the mouth or nostrils.

It was the most deadly gas ever to come out of a poison gas laboratory, and the armed soldiers who came pouring down into the vaults found themselves driven back by it, for it even burned through the mica eye-pieces of their gas masks, blinding them and sending them frantic with the agonising pain.

Only a thin rubber solution painted over the mica could have saved it from the gas, and in the deadly murk in which he was going swiftly to work, Zworge knew that he was reasonably safe provided he did not take too long over the job.

He himself was clad in tight-fitting rubber from head to foot, and he worked like a madman, picking up boxes of bullion and staggering with them to the earth crawler, then returning for more.

Above the shouts and screams of the gas-stricken soldiers he could hear a great tumult in the streets outside, and he knew with the arrival of the fire brigades and their latest life-saving devices he would be in grave peril of being attacked.

But still, he hadn't done so badly, as it was. He reckoned he had already loaded half a million pounds worth of bullion into the crawler, tumbling the boxes in anyhow so long as he got them aboard.

Just one more load and he would quit, the steel door in the hull would slide shut and he'd be gone, burrowing his way down into the bowels of the earth. He would surface in

some lonely spot somewhere on the Scottish coast, cache the bullion, drive the earth crawler into some lonely loch under cover of night, then collect the bullion at his leisure and take it away aboard his yacht.

He had not the slightest qualms of conscience or regret about the men whom he had so basely deserted and betrayed. It meant nothing to him that they had risked their liberty and their lives in his service.

All that mattered to Zworge was that they had served their turn and now he was finished with them. Lured on by a promise of rich plunder they had helped him to build and operate the earth crawler, and if he had outwitted them in the end it just proved that he was so much cleverer than they, and deserved to benefit by his cleverness.

The tumult in and about the great building was deafening now. So much so that the frantically working Zworge failed entirely to hear a new and ominous note until it was too late.

It came on him suddenly, that dull, reverberating roaring and, even as he dropped the bullion box he was lifting and wheeled in alarm, there was a terrific crash of breaking concrete, the scream of tortured steel, and up through the floor burst the whirling conical nose of the Mole.

Zworge never hesitated. With one bound he made for his earth crawler; but already the door in the hull of the Mole was open and from it leaped a slim, rubber-clad figure.

As though catapulted from a sling he hurled himself at Zworge, wrapping his arms round the knees of the master-crook in a perfect rugby tackle and bringing that startled individual crashing face foremost to the floor.

But Zworge was up again in an instant, fighting savagely to stem off this other rubber-clad figure. Behind his gas mask Zworge's thin, cruel lips were drawn back from his teeth in a wolfish snarl, and his eyes were blazing with an animal fury.

For Zworge knew who his attacker was, and in the berserk rage which seized him at the thought that, even at this eleventh hour, Kenyon had interfered again with his plans, Zworge brought his knee up with savage force, driving it into Kenyon's stomach. Kenyon grunted, and for an instant he relaxed his grip on Zworge.

Seizing his opportunity, the master-crook drove his fist with smashing force into Kenyon's masked face. Then his fingers fastened on the mask in a desperate effort to tear it from Kenyon's mouth and nostrils and expose them to the deadly murk of the poison gas.

But Kenyon's hand was on the man's wrist, holding it as though in a vice, and his other hand had Zworge tightly by the throat. The master-crook gasped, panted and writhed beneath that terrible throttling clutch about his throat, but Kenyon's fingers pressed remorselessly tighter and tighter.

In one last despairing effort, Zworge attempted to bring his knee up again into Kenyon's stomach, but Kenyon eluded the kick with a deft twist of his body.

Simultaneously he tore Zworge's fingers from the mask and, still holding that wretched, squirming individual by the throat, he drove his fist again and again into Zworge's masked face.

There was every atom of Kenyon's strength behind the blows, the accumulated strength engendered by all the foul wrongs which Zworge had done him, and when

eventually Kenyon stayed his hand and released his grip on Zworge's throat, the master-crook sagged limply at the knees and pitched face foremost to the floor.

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A few days later the newspapers throughout the country gave flaring headlines to the news that Kenyon's prison sentence had been quashed and that he had been the victim of false evidence faked by Zworge.

They also quoted the *London Gazette* which stated that Captain Robert Kenyon of the Tank Corps, had been promoted to the rank of major and had been awarded the Distinguished Service Order.

The next sensation was the trial of Zworge and his gang. Kurz was the only one to escape the scaffold, for the information he had given Kenyon about Zworge was taken into consideration in his favour.

As for Zworge, he paid for his crimes with his life, as did the members of his gang, all of whom he had so basely betrayed.

"And now that that's all over, Bert," said Kenyon on the closing evening of the trial, "what about you and I going up north and having a little quiet fishing somewhere?"

"Quiet," said Bert feelingly, "is the word, guv'nor!"

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

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[The end of *The Black Mole* by George Ernest Rochester]